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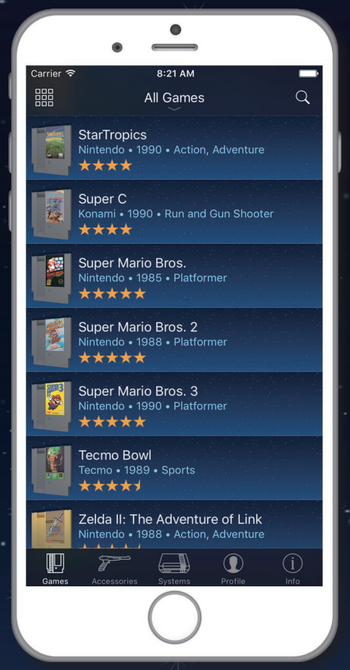

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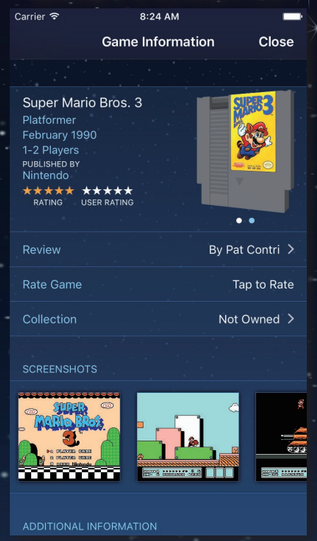

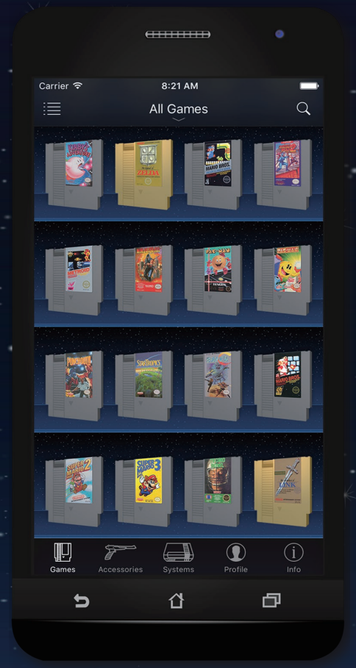

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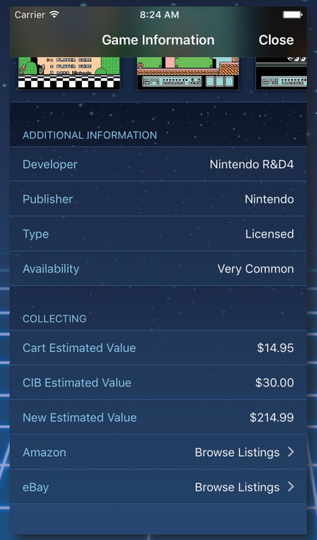

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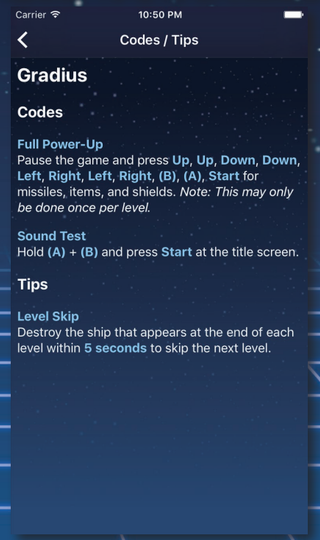

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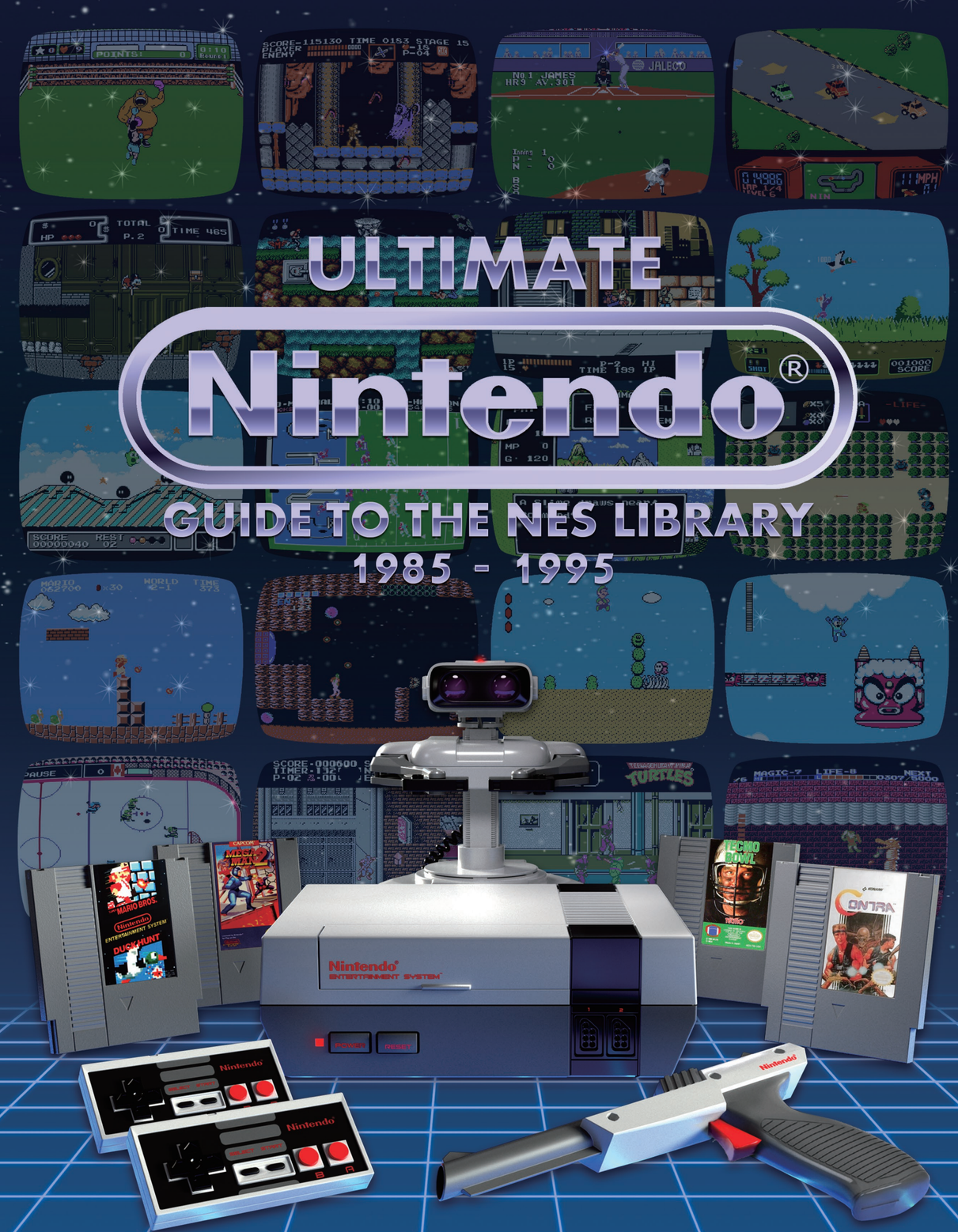

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to all those fans of retro video games and consoles, be it Atari, Nintendo, PC, Sega, or any others. Through your interest, discussion, and playing of these games, you are helping to keep these classics alive for future generations of video game players.

I also want to dedicate this book to all those who helped support me through the arduous process of writing, editing, and compiling it. Your encouragement was and is very much appreciated!

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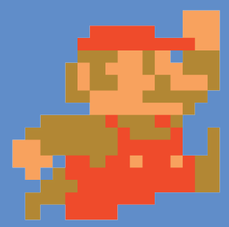

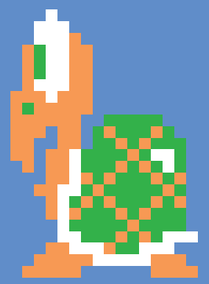

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About the Author/Editor:

Pat Contri is a video game player, collector, and historian who has had an interest in Nintendo since receiving an NES console for Christmas in 1987. He is known primarily online for his web shows *Pat the NES Punk*, *Flea Market Madness*, and *The Completely Unnecessary Podcast*. He is also the co-director and co-producer of *The Video Game Years*, the year-by-year historic video game web series, and conducts the live annual NES Charity Marathon. In his spare time (which isn't much) he enjoys movies, the gym, and eating far too many nachos.

About the Contributors:

Ian Ferguson spends way too much time researching games instead of sleeping and is the general manager of Luna Video Games. He is also well versed in pinball, synthesizers, and the *Peanuts* comic strip. He currently resides in San Diego with his wife Vani and their cat Spike and eats all of the breakfast cereal as they sleep.

Asheton Phinney, AKA "Ashi," is an interstellar bounty hunter, a princess-rescuing plumber, a whip-wielding vampire slayer, a writer residing in Delaware, a brave blue robot, a bubble-blowing dragon, a cute pink gourmand, a summa cum laude graduate of Dickinson College, and a sword-swinging, boomerang-flinging, studio art-majoring, creative writing-minoring hero with a lot of heart(s).

Jim Evans still plays terrible games so others don't have to. He is compiling 8 and 16-bit retro video game music into podcast episodes on YouTube called *The Retro Sound Test*. He can also be found talking gaming nonsense on Instagram @super_jimtendo.

Karen Niemla is of the "Oregon Trail Generation" and enjoys retro consoles and computers, PC gaming, web design, drawing, and writing. For 12 years she's been a librarian and is currently a Reference and Research Librarian at Mercyhurst University. She collects any retro games that interest her, particularly Atari 8-bit.

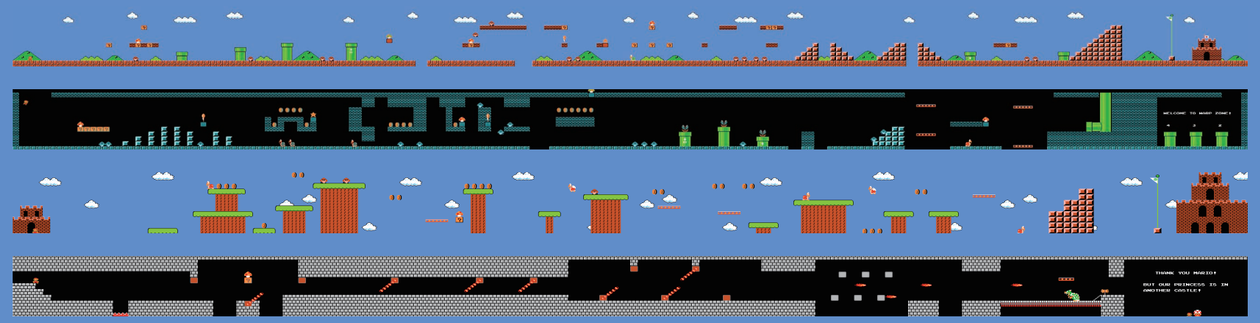
Joey "Roo" DeSena co-founded the geek-centric website, Clan of the Gray Wolf, in 2009. He has two flagship web series: *16-Bit Gems* – spotlighting under-appreciated video games from the '90s – and *The Way Games Work* – explaining video game technology to the layman. Additionally, he has produced original content for Vsauce3 and RetrowareTV.

Kyh Yang is an advocate for Barbie games, which are too often dismissed. She thinks Dr. Wily's Mets are the cutest enemies ever. Her greatest obsession is the game composer Tim Follin, and she highly recommends the ZX Spectrum's *Agent X* track. She is den mother to all, but especially the WRecking Crew.

Dagan Moriarty really wanted to pilot an X-Wing and/or Voltron when he grew up. But alas, he had to settle for his backup career as an animator working in television. He loves his amazing family and awesome friends, and he's not above using flattering adjectives in return for gifts. He is co-host of the retro-fueled *KnockBack Podcast*.

Peter Skerritt began playing video games back in 1976 at the age of 4 and hasn't stopped since. Playing *Hardball!* and *4th & Inches* on his Commodore 64 in the late 1980s sparked an interest in sports video games which continues today. He also enjoys pinball and arcade games.

Joe Pingree is a 30-something college student in Detroit. A lifelong NES fan, he has spent nearly three years building a sizable collection of boxed and loose game cartridges, his favorite of which is *Mega Man 2*. He enjoys reading, writing, and retro gaming on a variety of platforms.



The Yuletide Magnificence of Nintendo's Non-Console Console

by Blake Harris

The Nintendo Entertainment System changed my life... twice.

The first time, as a kid, when my brother and I opened an NES on Christmas Day. I remember, as we ripped open the wrapping paper and squealed with joy, that I didn't even really know what this thing was. Control deck? Zapper? Some game called *Super Mario Bros. Duck Hunt*? No wait, it was actually two games! And, just like that, my maniacal excitement instantly doubled! Looking back and relieving the exuberance of that childhood memory, two things strike me about that fateful Christmas:
- So many people my age have a similarly wonderful NES memory
- Although none of us realized it at the time, those memories came so close to never actually happening.

And that leads to the second time the Nintendo Entertainment System changed my life: researching and writing a book called *Console Wars* and, in the process, learning about how unlikely it was that Nintendo succeeded in selling the NES.

That's because just two years earlier in 1983 the video game industry had imploded. Atari had oversaturated the market with a bunch of lousy games, and the stuff coming out of Coleco and Mattel didn't help the cause. So the industry crashed, lots of folks lost their jobs and retailers – the gatekeepers responsible for what gets bought and sold – lost interest in video games. The fad, as they now called it, was irreversibly over; video games, they said, were dead.

In hindsight, this may sound utterly ridiculous. How could an industry that, nowadays, is bigger than film and music combined, ever have been thought to be over? Laugh all you want, but it's not as silly as it sounds. Because around this time, personal computers were starting to enter the living and the general thought was that if electronic games were going to be played, then they'd be played on PCs. With a powerful (and expensive) computer in the home, why would anybody bother spending a couple hundred bucks on some contraption that only played video games?

Well, Hiroshi Yamauchi—the president of Nintendo Co. Ltd – was one of the few who believed that people might buy such a thing. And so in 1983, his company released an 8-bit console called The Family Computer. Sold only in Japan at first, the "Famicom" (as it was commonly called) absolutely thrived. So much so that Yamauchi, along with Nintendo of America president Minoru Arakawa, believed that this console could potentially flourish in a country where video games had been declared dead. And so in 1984, Nintendo tested the American waters with a Famicom derivative called the Advanced Video System (AVS). This did not go well. No, not at all.

What was it that had convinced Arakawa this might actually work? What persuaded him to believe that Nintendo, a company nobody had ever heard of (minus a blip of arcade success with Donkey Kong), could somehow resurrect the video game industry? Was he foolishly optimistic? Embarrassingly naïve? Or did this guy Arakawa have some sort of hubris for the ages? But as it turns out, the answer was none of those things. The reason for Arakawa's conviction was rather simple, actually: Fun.

Nintendo's console provided fun and, to him, this was a quality that could be translated between cultures. The joy felt by a Japanese kid playing one of Nintendo's great games – such as *Duck Hunt*, *Excitebike*, or *Balloon Fight* – was the same type of joy that would be experienced by kids in America (or anywhere else in the world). So for Arakawa and Nintendo of America's team of true believers, success was less a matter of if and more a matter of how. How to convince kids that this was different than what they'd played before. How to convince parents that Nintendo wouldn't go belly-up like the game-makers had before them. And, most importantly, how to convince retailers to take another chance on video games... when the reason that many of these guys had their jobs was because video games had gotten their predecessors fired.

What Nintendo ended up doing was a variety of clever things, like mall tours, newsletters, and sophisticated try-and-buy displays. But at the heart of everything Nintendo did, there was one central notion: in order to resurrect video games, they simply cannot sell "video games." Meaning that whatever Nintendo sold, it had to be perceived by consumers as something else entirely. And so, in this fashion, Nintendo created a lexicon of terms to differentiate their products from the failure had come before them. Instead of a "console," they would be selling the "Nintendo Entertainment System." Wait, isn't that just a console? No, our games are played on a "control deck!" But it plays cartridges, right? No, the Nintendo Entertainment System plays Game Paks! And it comes with a "Zapper" (light gun) and your very own "Robotic Operating Buddy" (R.O.B.). Although few games actually utilized R.O.B., he was a big part of Nintendo's marketing effort to make folks forget about the crash. He was, in retrospect, the company's robotic Trojan horse. And, as with the Greeks, Nintendo found enormous success.

In 1986, the first year that Nintendo's non-console console was released, the NES sold 1.1 million units. The following year, that number nearly quadrupled, before jumping even more in 1988 (7.0 million) and even more after that (9.1 million 1989). By 1990, about one out of every three houses in America owned a Nintendo Entertainment System.

Now flash back to that fateful Christmas day, when my brother and I ripped through wrapping paper to find a Nintendo Entertainment System. Not only did I fail to realize that *Duck Hunt* and *Super Mario Bros.* were separate games, but I had no idea about the unlikely success of Nintendo's 8-bit console. I knew nothing about Hiroshi Yamauchi's vision or Minoru Arakawa's belief. I knew nothing about Gail Tilden – who spearheaded the launch and later started *Nintendo Power* magazine – nor did I have even a clue about Randy Peretzman – who lugged around a suitcase containing a prototype of the NES; going store to store, from rejection to rejection. I knew nothing of these people, these and many more, who helped make my childhood incredible. These were the men and women behind-the-scenes who enabled Nintendo and video games to flourish.

But as much gratitude as I owe these pioneers – and believe me, it's a lot – they would be the first to admit that none of what they did would have been possible without the most important thing of all: great games. At the end of the day, that was the secret elixir that allowed Nintendo to bring an industry back to life. That was the magic that delivered us the fun. Without great games (and good games, and even the occasional bad game) none of this would have happened.

So it seems only fitting that there be a book that catalogues this most important, most incredible, most memory-creating part of the equation. And now there is. Enjoy...

Blake J. Harris is a writer and filmmaker based out of New York. He is the author of Console Wars and is currently co-directing the documentary based on his book, which is being produced by Scott Rudin, Seth Rogen, and Evan Goldberg. He will also serve as an executive producer on Sony's feature film adaptation of Console Wars. His work has appeared in places like Fast Company, IGN, Grantland, and The Huffington Post. Currently, he is writing companion pieces for Paul Scheer's How Did This Get Made? podcast. His latest book is The History of the Future: Oculus, Facebook, and the Revolution That Swept Virtual Reality, published by HarperCollins.

Nintendo Entertainment System & Major Accessories

The Nintendo Entertainment System was one of the most popular and influential video game consoles ever created, and besides its great game library, is also known for its famous and unique controllers and peripherals. Dozens and dozens of controllers/accessories were released for the NES during its lifespan, some nationally and some regionally. While some were very well received (Zapper), others were not (LaserScope). Some had similar functionality, like the Power Glove and U-Force, although the U-Force is largely forgotten while the Power Glove has become a cultural symbol of gaming. Here are summaries of the most prevalent NES devices and peripherals released.

Nintendo Entertainment System

Release Date: Oct. 1985
Developer: Nintendo
Availability: Very Common

The system that started it all, the NES was a remodeled Famicom (Family Computer), which was released in 1983 in Japan. It features Power and Reset buttons, two controller ports, and RF and composite audio/video outputs. The system was peculiar in the fact that game cartridges were inserted horizontally and pressed down inside a door, as opposed to other consoles where games were inserted (usually vertically) and would be visible while playing. This redesign was implemented to distance itself from being a "video game console" so it could be marketed as an "entertainment system." After the North American Video Game Crash of 1983, Nintendo thought this was in their best interests. The NES would eventually go on to hold a 90% market share on video games in the U.S., and helped revive a dying industry.

NES Controller

Release Date: Oct. 1985
Developer: Nintendo
Availability: Very Common

Nintendo's controller was revolutionary for eschewing the traditional joystick design for an 8-way directional pad, which was borrowed from the Nintendo Game & Watch handheld LCD games. It also added multiple buttons: B, A, SELECT, and START. This extremely versatile controller would establish the primary design for just about all game consoles to follow after. At least two controllers would be included with every NES console (four with the NES Sports Set). An extra pair of controllers would be available separately at retail stores later in the NES' lifespan.

NES Zapper

Release Date: Oct. 1985
Developer: Nintendo
Availability: Very Common

Nintendo's peripheral is perhaps the most famous light gun in video game history. Although the technology was nothing new (light gun technology in video game consoles can be traced back to the Magnavox Odyssey), Nintendo bundled this controller with most of their console package offerings (it was also available separately), while offering a few fun games to play early on when it was released. Although barely over a dozen light gun titles were released for the NES, it's hard to imagine the system without this accessory along with it. Note: also available in red-orange color.

R.O.B. (Robotic Operating Buddy)

Release Date: Oct. 1985
Developer: Nintendo
Availability: Uncommon

R.O.B. was included in the test market NES systems (along with the Zapper and two controllers) and was available as part of the Deluxe Set until 1988. Nintendo bundled R.O.B. with their console to help sell the NES as an "entertainment system" and included *Gyromite* for its use (R.O.B and *Gyromite* were also available separately). *Stack-Up* was the only other game designed for use with R.O.B. After installing R.O.B. with four AA batteries and attaching the needed accessories and testing, play could begin. Optical flashes from the TV screen would send R.O.B. commands to move objects by swiveling its arms, lowering/raising them, and grasping/releasing said objects with claws. For *Gyromite*, this involved moving two spinning gyros to lower and raise columns on screen, and for *Stack-Up* it involved moving five colored blocks. R.O.B. was not long for the NES world due to two reasons: the trouble in setting up the peripheral/using it and the lack of games. Even before release, Nintendo had no plans on producing more R.O.B. games, using it almost solely (and successfully) as a marketing mascot in the early days of the system.

NES Satellite
Release Date: 1989
Developer: Nintendo
Availability: Common

Released as part of the NES Sports Set as well as separately, this wireless multitap adapter allows for up to four controllers/players in a limited number of supported titles. The wireless peripheral itself is powered by six C batteries and sends its infrared signal to the receiver that connects to the two NES controller ports. The Satellite has a power button, independent turbo switches for A and B, and a CTLR/GUN button to toggle between normal games and those that use the Zapper.

NES Four Score
Release Date: 1990
Developer: Nintendo
Availability: Common

Similar to the NES Satellite, this multitap adapter connects directly to the NES controller port and accepts up to four controllers. The 2/4 Player Switch is used to toggle between use of two controllers or more, while the independent A and B turbo buttons enable use for all players if selected. Only a little over 20 NES titles supported three or more players with the NES Satellite and Four Score.

Game Genie Video Game Enhancer
Release Date: 1990 (Canada), 1991 (United States)
Developer: Codemasters
Availability: Common

Developed by Codemasters and sold by Camerica (Canada) and Galoob (U.S.), this cartridge adapter attaches to an NES cart and allows players to input codes (provided in the included reference book) via menu screen to temporarily modify the game's data. This allows the player to manipulate the game to unlock features such as stage selection, unlimited lives, invincibility, and much more. Later booklet releases with codes for newer games were available by mail. The Game Genie puts extra stress on the NES' internal pin connectors, which can bend after prolonged use. A copyright lawsuit filed by Nintendo against Galoob in 1990 delayed its release in the U.S. until 1991, after Galoob had won the case.

NES Top Loader (NES-101)
Release Date: Oct. 1993
Developer: Nintendo
Availability: Uncommon

Released late in the NES lifespan, this redesigned budget version of the NES Control Deck was sold in retail stores for $49.99. It received a visual overhaul to more closely match the SNES console out at the time. Unlike the original console, the Top Loader features a more traditional, top-loading cartridge slot. The software lockout chip present in the original NES is not included, making it easier to play games in general (although some unlicensed games require the lockout chip to function). Unlike the original console, which features both separate RCA composite and RF connectors, only the RF connector is included with the Top Loader, resulting in inferior visual quality overall. Also contributing to the inferior visuals is the appearance of vertical "jailbars" on screen due to an inferior motherboard on the majority of Top Loaders. A very limited number of Top Loaders had the RCA composite output installed as a modification by Nintendo when the console was mailed in (after customer complaints/requests). Included with the console (and also sold separately) was a redesign of the NES controller, nicknamed the "dogbone." It more closely resembles the shape and button design/layout of the SNES controller.

NES Advantage
Release Date: Oct. 1987
Developer: Nintendo
Availability: Common

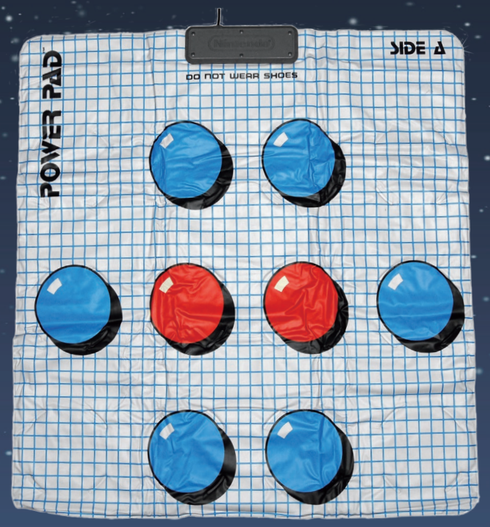
This well constructed, arcade-style joystick features large A and B buttons along with turbo function switches and two knobs to independently control the turbo speeds for each. When in use, the red lights above the Turbo buttons activate. On the right, there are the Select and Start buttons as well as Slow and the 1-2 player selector. Slow is a macro function to simulate "slow motion" in a game by repeatedly activating the Start button to pause and unpause the action. However, some games do not use Start to pause. The Advantage has two controller inputs to hook into the NES at the same time. The player selector button is used to enable two-player mode for a game that alternates between two players.

NES Max
Release Date: Mar. 1988
Developer: Nintendo
Availability: Common

This controller features a wing-shaped design for a slightly better grip. Besides the standard Start, Select, B, and A buttons, there are also independent B and A turbo buttons available. The most unique feature is the floating, sliding, circular cycloid thumb rest inside a D-pad ring that surrounds it. It was marketed somewhat for use with sports and racing titles.

Power Pad
Release Date: Sept. 1988
Developer: Nintendo
Availability: Common

Originally conceived and produced by Bandai as the Family Fun Fitness Pad (packed with *Athletic World*) in 1987, Nintendo bought the rights to it from Bandai and rebranded it as the Power Pad. This two-sided, gray mat pad accessory features pressure-sensitive buttons embedded underneath the plastic cover. Players control their character in the game by stepping, running, jumping, and moving around on one of the two sides specified by the game. Side A features eight buttons and Side B, which most games used, has twelve (numbered 1-12). It was originally released as a standalone peripheral and packed with *World Class Track Meet* (originally Bandai's *Stadium Events*), but was later bundled with the NES Power Pad Set. Only six compatible games were released for its use: *Athletic World*, *World Class Track Meet*, *Dance Aerobics*, *Short Order / Eggsplode!*, *Street Cop*, and *Super Team Games*.



Power Glove
Release Date: 1989
Developer: Mattel
Availability: Uncommon

Originally available in two sizes, this controller is worn on the player's right hand. On its side are the standard NES D-pad and buttons as well as a program button and a 0-9 keypad. The included L-Bar sensor attaches to the top or bottom of the TV and its side. The sensor reads audio signals emitted from the glove to record its vertical, horizontal, and depth movement. It also registers the bending of the thumb, index finger, and last three fingers. For proper use, players are required to enter codes numbered between 1-14. The first 13 are specific preprogrammed arm and finger movements mapped to D-pad and button presses and combinations. Entering "14" will allow the controller to be used as a normal controller via its D-pad and buttons. Only two games were designed specifically for use with the Power Glove (but not required): *Super Glove Ball* and *Bad Street Brawler*.

In Their Words – Insight on the NES Launch in October 1985

by Frank Cifaldi

"Well, the good news is they're going to let us land. You might want to give your seat belt a little extra tug, because we're going to go in a little fast."

A young Howard Phillips – normally bright, cheerful and enthusiastic – clung tenaciously to his seat as the plane prepared for a dangerous descent into New Jersey. It was late September of 1985, and if he wasn't busy wondering whether the high winds of Hurricane Gloria might rip his plane apart, he might have had a lot on his mind.

Phillips was the warehouse manager for a moderately successful arcade game distributor called Nintendo of America, then riding on the success of its Donkey Kong franchise. He and 11 of his colleagues were flying in to help unload, set up, display, and with any luck, sell the company's new home console, the Nintendo Entertainment System, despite the fact that the entire home videogame industry was declared dead over a year prior.

The cabin pointed down at a very uncomfortable angle, and the plane, its wings shaking violently, jerked through the high winds and powered onto the runway. Phillips and his colleagues, a bit shaken but safely on the ground, were greeted by an eerily silent Newark Airport; theirs was the first plane given clearance to land in the volatile weather, and the entire airport was deserted. Outside the huge puddles grew larger, as the winds whipped the rain in every conceivable direction.

The Nintendo of America SWAT team had arrived. Their mission: to set in motion the complete revitalization of the videogame industry. It wasn't going to be easy.

It was in the summer of 1983 that Phillips first got his hands on a Family Computer (Famicom for short), the home console that Nintendo's Japanese parent company was getting ready to introduce in its home region. As the shipping manager, Phillips had the rare privilege of cracking open boxes of new products sent in from Japan for evaluation, digging through various new arcade boards, toys, and black-and-white LCD games to see if any might potentially succeed in the United States market. "It was a little bit like Christmas," Phillips recalled.

One of these boxes contained a curious red-and-white plastic console with tethered game controllers. Along with it came a handful of squat cartridges housed in plastic cassette-like cases, each adorned with the name of a popular Nintendo arcade game.

"I plugged it in, and all of a sudden there were the arcade games we had been playing in these big 250-pound boxes, and putting in quarters every time," said Phillips.

"But with the Famicom system, you could just keep playing and playing and playing. And that was just such an amazing, cool thing. That was a big 'whoop' moment for us."

Nintendo's first attempt at distributing the system was through a proposed 1983 partnership with the industry's then-leader, Atari. Atari would pay for the exclusive hardware distribution rights, and Nintendo would make money introducing its software into American homes. It didn't work out.

"...the systems that had come before failed to deliver an arcade experience at home."

Whether Atari actually intended to sell the Famicom or was just tying up Nintendo to eliminate competition with its upcoming 7800 console is a matter of historical debate that is largely irrelevant: the entire videogame industry was crashing violently, and Atari did not actually have enough money to acquire the rights to the Famicom. By the time Nintendo learned this, it was too late to find another partner. Home videogames were dead, and all of the companies that made them were either dead too or, at best, on life support. If Nintendo was going to introduce its Famicom to American gamers, it would have to do so on its own.

"Nintendo really needed to come up with a point of difference, and some way of getting the retailer to believe that the consumer would embrace this as a different and newer form of entertainment," recalls Gail Tilden, who was then Nintendo's advertising manager.

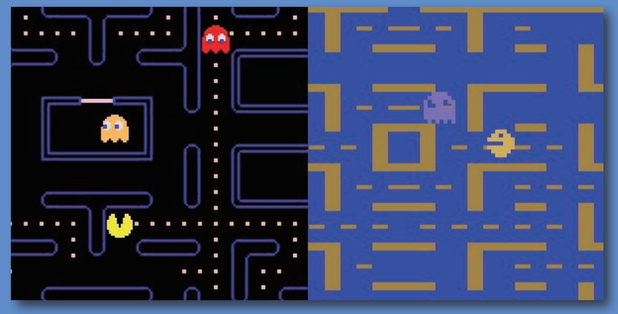
Tilden arranged focus tests with children early on. The kids sat in a room with brand new videogames and unlimited quantities of pizza. As one might expect, they had a great time. To Tilden's untrained eyes, the tests seemed to be a remarkable success, but when the research experts were called in for analysis, things seemed bleak.

"We asked, gee, if we get this kind of reaction, what kind of results would you expect?" said Tilden. "And they said well, if you get this kind of reaction, usually you don't launch the product."

The problem was perplexing; no one was buying home videogames anymore, and yet, kids were still enthralled at the arcades. The problem, Nintendo realized, was that the systems that had come before failed to deliver an arcade experience at home.

"When the [Atari] 2600 came out, it was a novelty for us gamers for a period of time," said Phillips. "But after you play a bunch of stick figure baseball games with your buddies, you realize well, OK, we kind of exhausted ourselves pretty quick on that. And then it's on to the next arcade game, as opposed to the next crappy Atari game that's coming out.

"The 2600 was pretty successful, and then things started getting pretty diluted, but it was clear that it was just more of the same. Things were not even close to what they were in the arcade. And the arcades were interesting and cool and, you know, what's new and hip. What's new today is down at the arcade, it wasn't the next game coming out for the 5200 or whatever. They always just looked kind of wimpy and lame."



Tilden agreed. "Up until the time the NES launched, what people would say was, 'it's just like in the arcade,' but it really wasn't anything like in the arcade," she said. "People would just keep saying that, but not really offering that. So we really believed that the experience we were delivering was just as fun as if you were playing in the arcade."

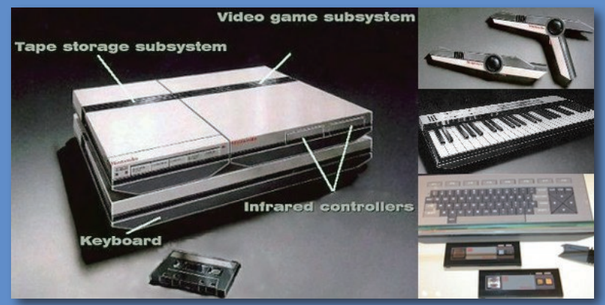
"We had a pretty strong belief that if we could get the consumer to try the product or experience the product, they would believe it was a new form of entertainment that they wanted to participate in."

If Nintendo was to successfully get the Famicom into American homes and get players hooked, its system would have to offer something new. It couldn't just be another videogame box, it had to be a robust, fully-featured entertainment system.

"The evolution of a species is now complete..."

At the January 1985 Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, in a booth manned by company president Minoru Arakawa himself, Nintendo introduced the Advanced Video System, or AVS for short. With a sleek, futuristic design by Lance Barr (who, over 25 years later, is still with the company), the system certainly did stand out from the crowd. It featured keyboards (both of the musical and typing variety), a tape drive for storing and saving custom data, infrared wireless controllers, joysticks, and a futuristic pistol. "The evolution of a species is now complete," promised a brochure passed out at the show, which showed the blocky graphics of systems past for comparison.

"It was really sleek and pretty techy compared to the Atari stuff," recalled Phillips. "The 2600 from my perspective still looked kind of junky and like a toy, and Lance went for a design with Don [James] that was much more like audiophile equipment, which was pretty cool and sleek."



The AVS was unlike anything that came before it, but buyers weren't fooled: it was still a videogame. If Nintendo was going to get the system onto shelves, it had to do two things: stray even further from the videogame systems that had come before, and cut down on the prohibitive cost that the AVS would surely command.

"[Nintendo] knew that the Advanced Video System was probably going to be too expensive for consumers to really jump into it at a reasonable rate," said James. "And so they had cost-engineered the unit back to what we currently know as the lunch box."

The "lunch box," as many who worked at Nintendo of America at the time refer to it, was sent by the Japanese office as the final design of the American system. As usual, Phillips opened the package, which contained a putty-colored, injection-molded hunk of plastic that was, for all intents and purposes, the final design of what would be the Nintendo Entertainment System.

"It was pretty funny," recalled Phillips. "To me, not having a particularly well-developed aesthetic, I thought 'Oh, it's interesting. It's kind of cool.' And that's when Lance and Don came out, and I think they were both forewarned of what was to come. But when they, [laughs], when they actually saw it, it was pretty funny. They were pretty disappointed."

"The parts were done, but they hadn't done any coloration or put any names on it or anything at that point," recalled James. "Lance Barr and I took the time to take it back into our design studio and created that light gray, dark gray and black band for the final version of the product."

The AVS' pistol concept was kept, though in a similarly cost-reduced form as the Zapper we know today. Nintendo had managed to create an affordable, family-friendly unit, but one final piece – inspired by toy industry trends of the time – was needed. One unassuming day at the office, Howard Phillips cracked open the latest package to arrive from Japan, and pulled out something unexpected; a small toy robot, with two new games and a set of vague instructions.

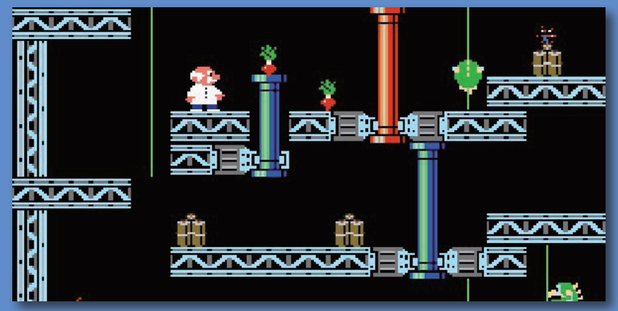
Excited to see what it did, Phillips hooked it up – half reading the instructions, and half ignoring them – and finally had it ready to go. He called some of his colleagues over. "Okay, and here's how it works!" he said. "Here's how you play the game!"

Phillips pushed a button. The television screen flashed white, sending a signal to the robot. The robot made a horrible grinding noise, as it very slowly moved from one position to another. Those present in the room couldn't help but laugh.

"That thing was definitely like watching grass grow," said Gail Tilden. "It was so slow, and to try and stand there and sales-pitch it in person and try to make it exciting; you had to have the eyes lined up just right or it wouldn't receive the flashes. It was kind of a challenge."

"It was hard as hell!" recalled Don James, laughing. "To play *Gyromite*,

that was a very tough game to master, because R.O.B. didn't move very fast. So you really had to think two or three moves ahead to allow him to do what he was going to do."



Jokes spread around the office about offering a conversion kit to turn the robot into a desk lamp. Regardless, the Robotic Operating Buddy, as Tilden would eventually christen it, had a very important purpose: it was attractive and interesting, and would make the Nintendo Entertainment System look like nothing that had come before it. It might have been the key to getting the system into players' hands, and once they had players, Nintendo was convinced the rest would be easy.

"It was one of the unique aspects," said James. "You know, like Rock 'em Sock 'em Robots is not something you want to play 70,000 hours. But it's cool to look at, right? And I think R.O.B. was kind of in that genre. It was a really neat, unusual little device. And it was fun to play! But again, like Rock 'em Sock 'em Robots, I wouldn't want to do it for 40 hours."

"The technology was so cool!" said Phillips. "We immediately started playing with the whole eyes thing and putting your hand between his eyes and the screen just because it was like voodoo magic. That was the cool part. But then his actual motion was just hysterically slow."

The Nintendo Entertainment System – R.O.B., Zapper and all – made its debut during the 1985 Summer Consumer Electronics Show in Chicago. R.O.B. adorned the cover of a brochure distributed to potential retailers, promising that he was the "star of a new Entertainment System that's programmed to make you rich."

Buyers were still reluctant to place orders, but they liked R.O.B., whose cold but friendly gaze fit in right alongside toy shop hits like Transformers, Voltron and the GoBots. The pieces were falling into place, but buyers – and indeed, Nintendo – needed some more proof.

Rather than risk the entire company's success on an expensive national roll-out, Nintendo decided a test market launch was in order. They would sell the NES in one city and, depending on the results, move on from there.

Typically, a test market launch is conducted in a moderately-sized city like Portland or Milwaukee, where the cost to conduct the experiment is low. This, however, was not Nintendo's approach. Nintendo went straight to the top -- New York City. After all, the old adage went, if you can make it there, you can make it anywhere.

"Mr. Arakawa really had this focus," recalled Tilden. "His strategy was, if it's going to work in New York, it will spread. He always had that sense that if he really believed in something, he really wanted to give it the biggest and best shot."

Arakawa budgeted $50 million for the test launch. Tilden relocated to New York just after CES, and started working with marketing, PR and sales agencies to establish and solidify the NES brand. There was a lot to be done.

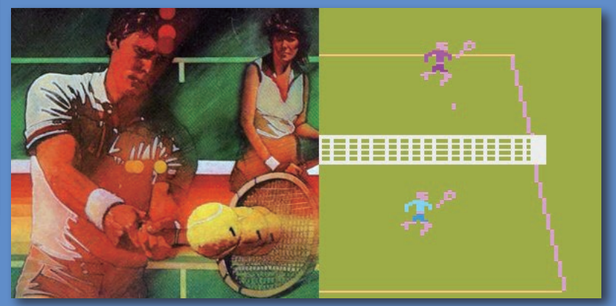
"That summer we had to create not just the name of the product itself, but the logos and packaging, and the look and feel, and the manuals and writing... just anything you can imagine doing, but doing it all at one time," recalled Tilden.

Nintendo's first wave of games carried a distinct visual style, with pixelated in-game graphics blown up against a black, starry sky.

This, like every aspect of Nintendo's campaign, was to differentiate its products from those that came before.

"There was an over-promise in the games that had been introduced prior," said Tilden.

"The consumer might see some beautiful fantasy graphics on the front, or a photographic image of people playing tennis, and then it was really just some enhanced version of Pong."



Nintendo's packaging would be up-front and honest. The 20 or so pixels that made up the batter on the cover of *Baseball* might not be as attractive as a photograph or a painting, but buyers knew right away exactly what they were paying money for. Disappointment would not be an issue.

"There was a sense that the consumer would walk away from something if they were dissatisfied with it, and there were too many over-promises," said Tilden. "You paid $30 dollars per game, and the second or third time you did that you were going to be done, because you weren't enjoying it.

"We really wanted the consumer to have a very good understanding of what they were buying, and to make sure that they really enjoyed it once they did purchase it."

Nintendo's products would separate themselves from the games of the past in every way possible – so much so that the word "videogame" was eliminated completely from the branding.

"We spent a lot of energy not calling it a videogame in any way," said Tilden. "So it was the Nintendo 'Entertainment System' and the cartridges were called 'game paks,' and we never used the word 'videogame' at all."

Don James, who worked with Tilden to finalize the packaging, flew out to New York in September to supervise the creation of Nintendo's point of purchase displays. This included window displays, game demo stations, and basically anything the consumer would see at the stores

"We didn't have a whole lot of time to work on the displays, and we knew they had to be pretty cheap," said James. "So I contracted a company... and this guy actually came down and picked me up in his private plane and flew me to his factory, and we sat there and drew up what eventually became the display, kind of out of my head."

The iconic P.O.P. display came in four parts. In the middle, a back-lit display showed off screenshots of all 17 games the NES would launch with. Under it, an enclosed Plexiglas box showed off the hardware itself, and everything that came in the box: the NES control deck, the Zapper gun, R.O.B. the Robot (and his accessories), two controllers, and the two included games, Gyromite and Duck Hunt (which took advantage of R.O.B. and the Zapper, respectively). And at the very top sat an over-sized reproduction of R.O.B.'s head. The red light on top was actually a rubber ball cut in half, a cheap solution devised by Lance Barr.

"...it really didn't seem like it was very high tech."

Meanwhile, Gail Tilden worked with a New York-based advertising agency to come up with the first NES ad campaign. The focus was on the birth of R.O.B. as a new form of entertainment, with the robot – in both the print and television campaigns – literally hatching from an egg.

"We didn't have the kind of special effects or computerized graphics that we have today for things like advertising, so it really didn't seem like it was very high tech," explained Tilden, reflecting on the television ad. "It was very funny."

With the product itself, the branding, the marketing and the displays all ready to go, there was just one thing left to do: get the systems into stores and sell them.

Phillips, James, and Rob Thompson, the tech lead, made their way through the deserted Newark airport to the rental car facility, where three cars were waiting for them.

"We each got a rental car for three months," said Phillips. "For a young kid, it was a completely wacky thing."

The three of them were a part of a twelve-person squad flown in from Seattle specifically to set up and tear down floor displays, demonstrate the products, accept air freighted shipments from Japan, and do absolutely anything and everything necessary to get the NES sold for the next three months.

By day they worked in a run-down rented warehouse in Hackensack.

"It was fairly small, and during the timeframe we were there, we survived a hurricane, an earthquake, a flood, and the rigors of the New York environment in 1985," remembered James.

One day, out of the blue, a rusty old barrel materialized in the parking lot. The Environmental Protection Agency showed up, fully decked in hazmat suits. James and company watched, wondering what might be inside, as they sealed it in a new container and took it away.

"We had a saying... oh, I can't remember, something like 'rats and snakes and toxic waste,'" said James. "That was how we described that particular building."

At night, the trio shared a flop house in Fort Lee, New Jersey. The rented condo only had two garage spaces, meaning the three raced home from work every day to try and avoid having to find street parking.

"And the taxi cabs would do their typical wheel waggle to try and give you a little intimidation with their bumper," remembered Phillips. "And you'd just do a big old rental car smile at them as you gave it right back to them double speed! It was young kids, fun, just rollicking kind of wild west cowboy days, just never a dull moment."

By day, members of the "SWAT team" went out to selected stores in the greater New York and New Jersey area – all 500 of them, give or take – to set up NES demo stations using James' displays. The stores were not

often happy to see them.

"You'd have the floor sales people who are rolling their eyes, or the manager coming down and saying, 'Somebody told me I've got to sell this crap,'" remembered Phillips.

"It was probably the longest and hardest I ever worked consecutive days in my life."

"I remember one woman coming up to me, and I don't know what sparked her to do this, but she came up to me and said, 'Nintendo. That's a Japanese company, right?' And I said 'Yeah! Yeah, it is, but we're actually from–' and I started doing my merry little jingle. And she goes, 'I hope you FAIL!'"

"I guess I was totally oblivious to the kind of nationalistic fervor over trade imbalance and all of that stuff."

At night, the staff would regroup at the warehouse, have a quick dinner, prepare the stock for the next day, and then race back out to do store demos late into the night.

"It was quite an experience," said James. "It was probably the longest and hardest I ever worked consecutive days in my life."

On Thursday, October 10, Nintendo held its NES launch party and cocktail reception at The Visage, "a typical 80s New York night club," according to Tilden. Silver-plated R.O.B.s were strewn around the room as showpieces, surrounding the demo stations that James hooked up. In the center stood a gigantic replica of the robot, put together by Nintendo's PR company at the time, Edelman.

Several members of the media were invited. Almost no one showed.

"Our big party turned into a great launch party for all those who were working on it, but we really didn't see any press at all," said Tilden. "So that was tough."

The following weekend, Tilden, her boss Ron Judy, sales guy Bruce Lowry, and a handful of others made their way to the world-famous FAO Schwarz in Manhattan. There, James had set up an enormous 15 by 15-foot demonstration area (the largest of any Nintendo display that year).

"FAO Schwarz, for whatever reason, was the darling of the PR team, in part because if you make it there you make it anywhere in New York, from a toy industry standpoint," recalled Phillips. "Now, we don't think of games so much as toys because of the age of the gaming population. 'Toy' is the last thing people want to hear you say about their Xbox 360 or their iPhone or something like that. But back then, we were coming off of things like Cabbage Patch Kids and Teddy Ruxpin, and those were huge, huge phenomena. So the fact that we were potentially going to be the phenomenon – FAO Schwarz was the penultimate of places to be."

The first sale came after not too long, and it was a big one: one gentleman came in and quietly bought the system and all 15 additional games.

"It took us a while to realize that it was really someone from a Japanese competitor," Tilden recalls, laughing. "But it was great to stand there and watch the first ones actually go through the register."

The SWAT Team worked seven days a week through, literally, Christmas Eve, and while sales did not set the world on fire, they were encouraging. If nothing else, interacting with customers proved Nintendo's intuition: once the kids got hold of the games, they became hooked.

A similar test market launch happened in February of 1986, this time in Los Angeles. For the occasion, Nintendo started bringing over new games from Japan. One of these was a brand new adventure called *Super Mario Bros.*, and by the time of the national roll-out of the NES, it would make gimmicks like R.O.B. the robot entirely unnecessary.

But that's another story.

Frank Cifaldi is a video game archivist/historian who has been a contributing author to publications/sites such as Gamasutra, 1Up.com, Edge, Wired, Nintendo Official Magazine UK, and more. He also is the founder of the The Video Game History Foundation, a non-profit foundation dedicated to the archival, preservation, and dissemination of historical media related to video games.

Key to this Guide

Each entry in the main NES game guide section consists of those game carts commercially released in North America between 1985-1995. PAL and HES releases exclusive to European and Australian regions can be found in separate sections. Promotional or special carts, such as *Miracle Piano* or *Nintendo World Championships 1990*, can be found in separate sections as well.

Each game listing contains the following information:

Game Title – The name of the game.

Genre – The classification or type of game, for example a platformer, racing, or a sports title. Some games consist of multiple genres or are a combination of two.

Release Date – The approximate date the game first became commercially available in North America.

Developer – The company responsible for the creation and programming of a game.

Ported by – In the case of a game originally created for the arcade, computer, or another game console, this is the company responsible for programming/translating it to the NES, if different from the original developer.

Publisher – The company responsible for financing the development, advertising/marketing, and release of a game. A publisher may develop a game internally with their own team, but often a publisher will hire another company to do the game development.

Players – The number of players the game is designed for. By default "1-2" will denote a multiplayer game with alternating turns; however "(simultaneous)" denotes a game that can be played or controlled by more than one player at the same time.

Special Features – Game attributes out of the ordinary, such as being able to save the game via battery backup, being able to save and continue via password, optional edit mode, optional 3D mode, and peripheral support such as using the Power Pad, NES Four Score or Satellite multitap adapters, R.O.B., Vaus controller, special Power Glove support, or the Zapper light gun.

Type – The classification of game release, whether authorized by Nintendo (licensed), or unauthorized (unlicensed). Unlicensed game carts are usually shaped and colored differently than licensed games.

Availability – The prevalence and relative popularity of a game during the lifespan of the NES, ranging from very common to extremely rare. Note: this does not necessarily relate to the availability of the game in current times.

Star Rating – The reviewer's overall appraisal of the game, pertaining to its quality relative to other similar games in the genre, date of release, related games in the NES library, and other factors.

💣 (Bomb) – Awful and/or broken: Not playable, nothing redeeming about the game in the least.
⋆ – Extremely bad/poor: No bright spots at all, no fun to be had, barely playable.
★ – Very bad, little to no merit: A very troubled game that's still playable with almost no fun factor.
★⋆ – Bad, but some merit: A game with problems, but is still playable and might have bright spots.
★★ – Below average: More problems than the average game keep it from being too entertaining.
★★⋆ – Average: Run of the mill, could be fun, but some issues hold this back from being a stand-out.
★★★ – Above average: An enjoyable game with more positive attributes than the typical title.
★★★⋆ – Good: An enjoyable and fun game with some negative attributes.
★★★★ – Very good: Extremely well done and very enjoyable, with a few flaws.
★★★★⋆ – Excellent: An outstanding game with very few minor flaws.
★★★★★ – Classic: Closest to perfection you'll find in both concept and execution.

1942

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Nov. 1986
Developer: Capcom
Ported by: Micronics
Publisher: Capcom
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

In this simple vertical shooter set during World War II, players pilot the Allied plane (P-38 Lightning) against waves of enemies and progress from carrier to carrier. Patterns of larger and smaller ships approach from the top and release salvos of bullets that must be dodged. The player's craft can maneuver the whole screen. Staying in the bottom quarter plays it safe, while moving up and getting close to larger aircraft allows shots to hit them quickly, taking out nuisances faster. While this is an early example of the genre, it has a decent variety of enemy types from small, fast craft to large bomber-type planes that fire wide spreads of bullets. There is also a basic power-up system that culminates in earning two wingmen for additional firepower. These power-ups are essential in later levels to deal with the larger onslaught. Instead of a secondary attack, players can initiate a defensive roll maneuver to dodge enemy fire – a really cool feature not seen often in shooters. The graphics are simple but get the job done in representing the different planes. Unfortunately, the sound effects are absolutely grating and sound like a dog playing with a telegraph but the game itself is thankfully fun. Turn down the volume, put on some better tunes, and take to the sky.

Reflections: This was Capcom's first breakout hit and spawned a long running series. The *Raiden* and *Strikers* games certainly owe some inspiration to this humble title. – IF

It's interesting that you play as a U.S. fighter plane trying to destroy the Japanese fleet. Being that Capcom is a Japanese company, were they simply trying to market towards the U.S. audience, or perhaps Capcom was harboring some World War II guilt? – PC

1943: The Battle of Midway

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Oct. 1988
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Players: 1-2
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⋆

The second entry in Capcom's vertically scrolling World War II shooter series has players once again piloting a fighter plane against waves of Japanese craft. While all levels start in the clouds, many in this title will switch to a lower air-to-sea perspective for boss fights against enemy carriers. The NES port of this game has some enhancements such as the ability to add points towards offense, defense, and various special weapon attributes, as well as to the plane's energy meter. This loadout customization creates a shooter with a bit more depth and gives the player the feeling of making their plane their own. This time, instead of a stock of lives, the player has a constantly ticking numbered energy value that is depleted by bullets and special attack usage. Energy can be replenished by grabbing POW orbs or by completing a mission, which grants an exponential bonus with each stage completed. Special weapons can be acquired by shooting the POW orbs until they change and are then collected. They're mostly standard fare, such as spread shots and lasers, but all are useful. One hit with depleted energy destroys the ship and ends the game. This approach unfortunately causes the secondary weapon, certainly without upgrades, to be almost too dangerous to use except for in emergency situations. While still a fun title, this would have benefitted from a more traditional approach to lives, time, and weapons.

Reflections: This is very much a "two steps forward, two steps back" sort of game. I appreciate the smooth enemy patterns, the added variety in weapons, the neat touch of swooping in close to the water, and the much better sound. On the other hand, the energy system is plain annoying as it ties special usage and health to a ticking timer which keeps players scrambling for POW icons to keep the maddening low energy alert at bay. – IF

10-Yard Fight

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Oct. 1985
Developer: Irem
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⋆

This serviceable and simple football title was the first one released for the NES. With your nine-player team (not 11), battle it out on the top-down gridiron in one of five increasing difficulties, from High School to Super Bowl. The play is simple and consists of either executing a running play, a passing play to a receiver, or an option play where you can toss to a runner before attempting a pass or running up the field. Players move slowly, making the field at times feel like it's never-ending, but defenders will always be on top of the runner, making zig-zagging to avoid tackles necessary. If players get caught, they can tap the control pad back and forth to try and get away from defenders. Defense consists of selecting one of two defenders and then tackling with a dive or trying to intercept the straight-line passes. It's not exactly a simulation entirely, but football staples like extra points, safeties, and even rudimentary punting and field goals are available. It's a game that is not without its charm (the small players are cute), but its slow pace and simplicity can get wearisome. For such a no-frills football game, the two-player mode can still be fun.

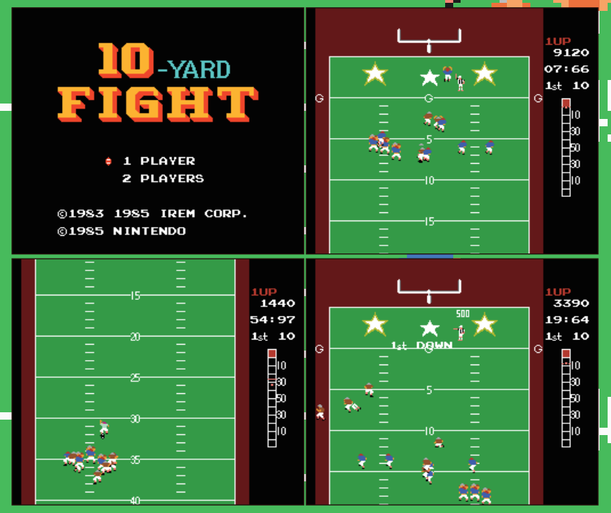
Reflections: *10-Yard Fight* is one of those games that has a special place in most gamers' hearts. It was an early black box NES release game in Oct. '85, and its cute little actions and sounds helped define the NES experience for those early adopters. The hardest difficulty is "Super Bowl," which could have earned a lawsuit from the National Football League had the game been released today, but back then it flew under the radar. What I will always remember the most from this game is the excruciatingly long time it takes for your wide receiver to go into motion and travel behind the line of scrimmage to stop and set. You could read this entire guide book before he finishes moving. – PC

3-D WorldRunner

Genre: Action, Shooter
Release Date: Sept. 1987
Developer: Square
Publisher: Acclaim Entertainment
Players: 1
Special Features: 3D Mode (optional)
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⋆

In this third-person action-platformer, the player takes the role of the "World Runner" who must run and jump over chasms while avoiding and shooting cute enemies. The game is very colorful with a wide and bright palette. The scrolling of the levels left/right and forward is done excellently, conveying a great sense of 3D depth that is helpful for the difficult jumps and avoidance of enemies coming at you. Available power-ups hidden in columns that the player can run into include the ability to run faster, a blaster to take out enemies, and short-term invincibility. Bonus stages are also available by grabbing balloons and floating up out of the screen. At the end of each of the eight worlds, the player must shoot and take down at least one centipede-like serpent who will fly at the player. The player has the ability to fly around the screen and fire for the duration of this battle. It's a very unique game that is graphically interesting and has a decent soundtrack to boot, while also providing a good challenge. For a trip, feel free to try the optional 3D mode with the included 3D glasses (if you can find them).

Reflections: My friend Kevin had *3-D WorldRunner*, and as a child I could never quite get the hang of it, barely making it to the start of the second world. I always loved the 3D look of the game, and didn't really know/care that it seemed like a ripoff of Sega's *Space Harrier* (it was a more innocent time). Like *Rad Racer*, the 3D aspect of the game was more of a novelty than a selling point to me. Although it does work alright (and the glasses look groovy on your face), it's more of a distraction to playing well than anything else. – PC



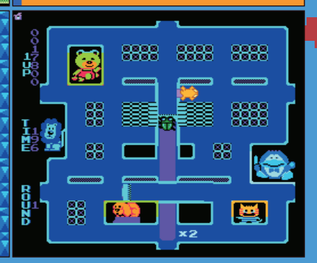
6 in 1

6 in 1 Real Player's Pack *(AUS)*
Genre: Compilation
Release Date: 1992
Developer: NTDEC / Mega Soft
Publisher: Caltron / Myriad Games
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Rare (Caltron), Extremely Rare (Myriad Games)
★

This Taiwanese multicart consists of six games playable via menu. *Cosmos Cop* is an interesting but flawed 3D third-person perspective shooter where you are a flying robot that shoots at and avoids incoming enemies, with below average scaling effects. *Magic Carpet 1001* is a mediocre Arabian-themed horizontal shooter with some interesting enemies, where you are armed with a bow and arrow while flying on a magic carpet. *Adam & Eve* is a strange single-screen action game where you're apparently the biblical Adam flying around on a balloon trying to pop the balloons of floating snakes. *Porter* is a serviceable, no-frills overhead puzzle game that tasks the player to push all the boxes on each level onto marked spots. *Balloon Monster* is a terrible single-screen game where the player has to shoot and pop all the bouncing bubbles on the screen before they lose momentum and no longer can bounce, thus killing the player. *Bookyman* is an inferior clone of the maze arcade game *Crush Roller*, where the player is a paint brush traveling around the maze levels, with the object being to paint the paths to complete the level while avoiding enemies. Overall, it is an oddity of a game pack filled with game clones of little interest. Note: Re-released with a different label by Myriad.

Reflections: It's hard to review a multicart game usually, but when just about all the games are below average clones of other games, it helps put the entire cart into perspective. *Cosmos Cop* is undoubtedly the sole highlight due to its ambitious nature of being a *Space Harrier* clone. Unfortunately, the NES's hardware prevents the 3D scaling from being pulled off too competently. *Balloon Monster* is an absolute embarrassment. It's a poor clone of *Buster Bros.*, but they couldn't even copy the gameplay correctly. Unlike that game, where the bouncing balls never lose momentum, in *Balloon Monster* they lose momentum quickly, making each level unwinnable after about 12 seconds if there are still any balls remaining. It's a rare cartridge, but not as rare as previously thought. In 2012, dozens of sealed copies of the game were discovered in Mexico (who knows how many more are still there) and sold on Ebay and game collecting forums. What was once a $1,000 game in brand new condition quickly plummeted to the $250 range. Yay!

In 1992, a company named Myriad Games in Kingwood, Texas bought roughly 1000 existing *6 in 1* carts (after Caltron went out of business) for redistribution at $69 each in the states. Myriad Games produced their own boxes, booklets, and slapped their own cheap sticker over the Caltron existing label. This version is much harder to find. – PC

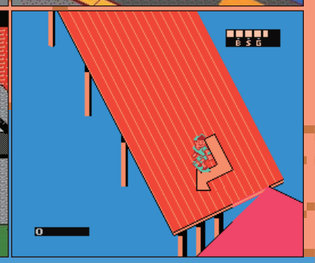


720°

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Nov. 1989
Developer: Atari Games
Ported by: Beam Software
Publisher: Mindscape
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

In this skateboarding game, the player skates on a diamond-shaped course and can do tricks to gain points and cash. This course connects the player to shops to upgrade their equipment (board, shoes, etc.) via money earned, as well as four different skating contests located at its edges: Ramp, Jump, Slalom, and Downhill. Ramp is a half-pipe where players can perform tricks for points, Slalom requires the player to skate in between pairs of colored flags, Jump has the player attempt to land a jump off a steep downward slope and hit a bull's eye target, and Downhill has the player navigate several turning jumps off slopes and banks to reach the finish line. Players obtain tickets to these four events via points earned by tricks in the course park and in the events themselves, in which they can earn a bronze, silver, or gold medal. On the connecting hub course, players have to travel around and do their swirling jump tricks without wiping out or running into enemies, which will reduce the timer. If the timer winds down before a player can get to the next competition, killer bees will appear and can run the player down, ending the game. If the player can complete all four different contests, they will advance to the next hub to repeat the same gameplay experience and attempt the four skating contests again, only this time with a higher difficulty. The game and its contests are all very simple, but the colors/graphics are nice and the controls are responsive and fun. For a short while, it's a nice skateboarding diversion.

Reflections: This was one of the first "extreme" sports games. The arcade version featured big boombox-style speakers on the top of the cabinet, as well as a circular joystick to rotate the skateboard's direction. I am not the best at the arcade version. The NES version thankfully simplified the controls, having you travel in the direction you press and controlling the speed by slowing with the B button. When the bees show up, the screen flashes "Skate or Die!", which would be the name of another NES skateboarding game that you may read about later. – PC



8 Eyes

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Jan. 1990
Developer: Thinking Rabbit
Publisher: Taxan
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⋆

This action-platforming game features eight different monster-infested mansions, selectable in any order, in which players guide Orin the Falconer on a quest to recover the titular gemstones. Each mansion is located in a different country, such as Italy or Africa, giving them each a unique look. The main weapons are a sword and Orin's falcon Cutrus, who can be set off to hunt enemies at a distance. Many sub-weapons are available, ranging from Molotov cocktails to magic orbs. A new sword is obtained at the end of each level after defeating the boss (usually a large king character based on the stage's region), and each level's boss is vulnerable to a particular one. Therefore, it is beneficial to beat the mansions in a set pattern, using swords that are more effective against particular bosses. The game has a lot going for it in design and setting, but the controls are very stiff and taking damage seems all but certain in sword combat, making avoidance the smarter, joyless option. The bizarre post-apocalyptic yet medieval storyline keeps the frustration interesting and the co-op mode, where one player can control Cutrus, helps bring out some fun but not enough to save the game from mediocrity.

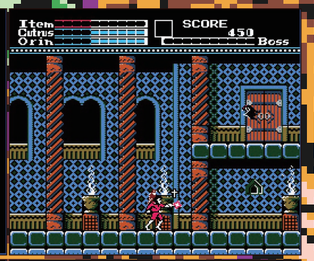
Reflections: This really is *Castlevania* mixed with *Mega Man*. The style, climbing animations, and even sub-weapon types mimic the popular Dracula-slaying franchise, while the selectable stages, winnable weapons, and bosses with only one weakness ape the Blue Bomber. This sounds like a winning combo but Orin makes Simon Belmont look like a limber and lively gymnast. – IF

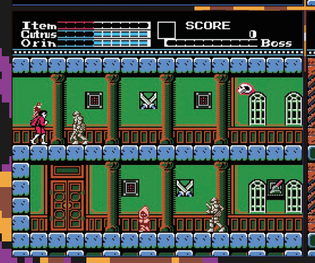
Abadox

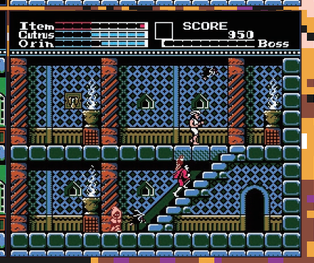
Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Mar. 1990
Developer: Natsume
Publisher: Milton Bradley
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⋆

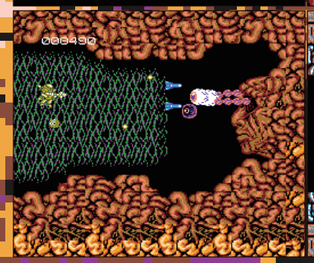
Natsume tries something a little different and sets this side-scrolling shooter in the digestive tract of a giant alien creature. The graphics do the theme justice with appropriately organic and slightly gross landscapes and creatures for the player to handle. Enemies are amusing and fitting, which include flying eyeballs, skeleton dogs, parasites... these certainly help create the setting. The gameplay is varied by introducing downward vertically scrolling levels between the horizontal ones to simulate descending further into the guts of the creature. It's a simple, effective touch that makes it feel as though one is really navigating through a large, living being, while varied backgrounds convey fighting in intestines, stomachs, and more. While the game handles the core concept really well in presentation, it falters in its play. The enemy waves feel oddly paced, and the weapons and power-ups are unsatisfying. The firing rate of the main gun feels off and not as snappy or quick as is usually required by the shooter genre. The enhanced weapons, such as lasers and missiles, fare a bit better but are sadly not as creative as the rest of the game. Combining these factors with a large hitbox for the main character results in everything feeling a bit unrefined. It's a shame the action doesn't match the interesting concept, because it could have been a fresh take in a genre commonly dominated by space and plane themed titles.

Reflections: I remember when this game came out that it was sort of a big deal, because at the time it was considered more graphic than the norm. Not violent, mind you, but simply guts, organs – that sort of thing. It's interesting to me how much censoring games at the time made even the relatively tame seem taboo. – IF









Action 52

Genre: Compilation
Release Date: 1991
Developer: Active Enterprises
Publisher: Active Enterprises
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Rare
★

This collection of 52 simple and poorly programmed games is more like a set of short demos masquerading as full game experiences. Most of the short games here are either shooters or platformers, with the odd strange game of a different genre thrown in here or there, such as the incoherent puzzle game *Meong*. The games range from amusingly bad to horrifically awful. Most have glitchy bugs and terrible controls, and recycled sounds and graphics are rampant from one game to the next. If you manage to stumble upon a game that's playable, it will only be a few short stages long as there isn't enough memory on the cart to actually have multiple games of substantial length. The multicart is not entirely without merit though, as a few of the game concepts are actually clever, such as *Streemerz* where you are a mouse in a party hat using a party streamer as a grappling hook, or *Fuzz Power* where you're a hairy man who has to fend off blow-dryers. Feel free to check out *Cheetahmen*, a poor action-platformer that has a very catchy in-game tune! At the end of the day, Action 52 is a bizarre gaming experience that feels like a never-ending fever dream.

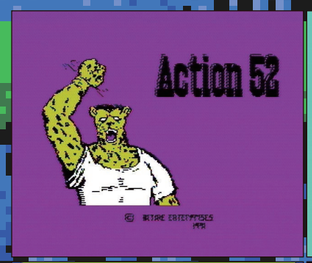
Reflections: Active Enterprises, a Florida-based electronics company, hired a few college kids to cobble together this multicart to sell it at the oh so low price of $199. Active Enterprises created the Cheetahmen, a trio of mutant man cheetahs in the same vein as the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, in order to market it as the flagship game/characters on the *Action 52* cart. The music to *Cheetahmen* is actually a very good, fast-paced bumpin' track that is still remixed heavily today. In fact, whoever composed the music for the games actually overachieved, since the tracks are usually at least not as poor as the games that they're featured in. – PC

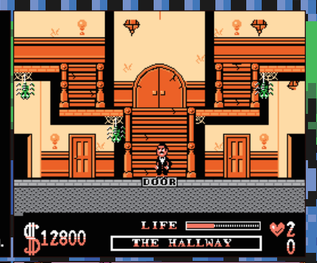
The Addams Family

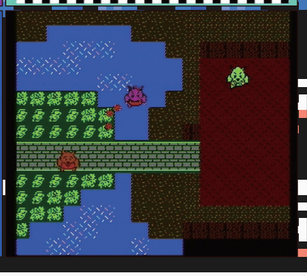
Genre: Platformer
Release Date: Jan. 1992
Developer: Ocean Software
Publisher: Ocean Software
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

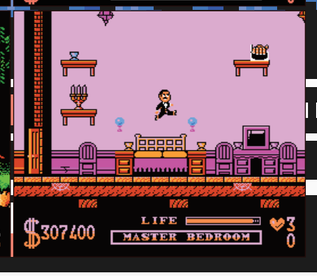
Help Gomez rescue his family members while exploring their mansion in this nonlinear platform game. Instead of set levels, players are free to explore the mansion and surrounding areas in a more open manner while searching for keys and items that will allow them to overcome certain obstacles or locks. Foes are basic but are suited to the environment and include the expected host of rats, spiders, living armor, and other haunted mansion denizens. Gomez can dispatch enemies by jumping on them and can also bounce off them to reach higher areas that generally contain more money and better treasure. While the exploration is fun, the game suffers for a number of reasons. The collision detection is very rough, resulting in Gomez taking damage instead of defeating enemies. There are a number of cheap, unavoidable hits and even an instant death pit behind an unassuming door. The graphics are garish in places, and it can be tough to immediately assess what can damage Gomez, which is important when the game gives players no time to react. There was more obvious effort here than most licensed movie games, but it's still a mess in execution.

Reflections: I remember seeing this game released on almost every system in some form or another and thinking it would be very cool to explore the iconic spook-filled mansion. It is cool to explore, but the overall game is boring at best and frustrating in its worst spots. This can be said for many of Ocean Software's licensed movie titles. They took greater care than a company like LJN or Acclaim, but the end result is still a rushed pile of code intended to cash in on a property's momentary popularity. Better versions exist, notably for the Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES). – IF









The Addams Family: Pugsley's Scavenger Hunt

Genre: Platformer
Release Date: Aug. 1993
Developer: Ocean Software
Ported by: Enigma Variations
Publisher: Ocean Software
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★

This simplistic open world platformer tasks Pugsley to search the family mansion and surrounding grounds for his family members, before restoring Fester's memory and stopping the Judge from obtaining the Addams fortune. The game is incredibly bare bones. There is no music, sound effects are simplistic, and there is little to speak of in the way of backgrounds. The house is drab, and while areas like the kitchen and game room are identifiable by some decorative objects, all areas are flat and lifeless looking. Jumping on a foe's head is the only way to destroy them, and the only attack you'll ever get. Basic baddies are what one would expect with a variety of insects, ghouls, and haunted items. Holding down jump after hitting an enemy will cause Pugsley to springboard slightly higher to get to out of reach platforms and items. Players can collect hearts to restore life, shoes for a speed boost, and candies that will refill a heart after 50 are collected and grant an extra life at 100. Bosses with attack/movement patterns are standard, with some obvious spooky mansion choices like goblins and oversized spiders. Defeating bosses will increase your life capacity. The controls handle fine, but the areas of the mansion aren't particularly fun to look at or navigate, as there aren't many well-crafted platforming segments. While the freedom to explore is nice, the game itself becomes boring quickly and isn't something many will return to once they've discovered the secrets and quickest ways to complete the objectives.

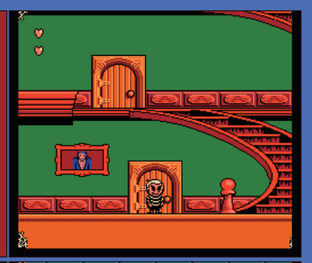
Reflections: This has practically nothing to do with the SNES version of the same game. Instead, this is an incredibly bare bones port of the SNES version of the original game with Pugsley in place of Gomez. Why? Who knows? As licensed tie-ins tend to be cash grabs anyway, this might have been the quickest way to churn out an additional title on a system teetering on mainstream obsolescence. – IF

Advanced Dungeons & Dragons: DragonStrike

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: July 1992
Developer: Westwood Associates
Publisher: FCI
Players: 1-2
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

In this top-down free-roaming shooter, the player is tasked with using one of three dragons (with different attack, defense, and speed attributes) and liberating the land of Ansalon by destroying enemy dragons, warships, cavemen, and other monsters. Your dragon moves at a constant speed, can be rotated, and can ascend/descend to two different levels to attack enemies in the sky or on the ground. This gameplay element is also used to avoid obstacles like trees or cliffs by flying higher. Each dragon has a "gas attack" that will stun your enemies for a short time and a normal fire attack to destroy them. Your dragon can power up by picking up items in each level to increase speed and offensive/defensive abilities. There's some nice action and unique gameplay here, and the different objectives on the levels keep it fresh. It's just too bad the flying gameplay is simplistic and lacks any real strategic depth.

Reflections: There aren't too many free-roaming shooters on the NES, so I have to give *Dragonstrike* props for that. The cavemen who hurl rocks at you are very amusing to me… somehow they survived from prehistoric into medieval times still wearing leopard skins. Unlike the other computer versions and *Dungeons and Dragons* (*D&D*) itself, this port only offers straightforward action and not really too much in the realm of strategy and role-playing game (RPG) elements. Why don't you just take away my 23-sided dice while you're at it? – PC



Advanced Dungeons & Dragons: Heroes of the Lance

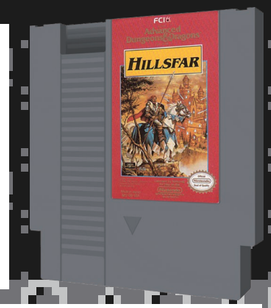
Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: Jan. 1991
Developer: SSI, U.S. Gold
Ported by: Natsume
Publisher: FCI
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★

Based on the popular *Dragonlance* RPG setting, this side-scrolling game follows a party of adventurers who must journey into the ruins of Xak Tsaroth to battle an ancient dragon and retrieve an artifact known as the Disks of Miskahal. The party consists of eight characters: Goldmoon, Sturm Brightblade, Caramon Majere, Raistlin Majere, Tanis Half-Elven, Tasslehoff Burrfoot, Riverwind, and Flint Fireforge, each with his/her own strengths and abilities. Goldmoon, for example, is a cleric who can heal the group with spells, while Tasslehoff is a thief who can disarm traps for the party. The player is limited to using only one character, but may switch to another character at any time. If the current hero dies, the game automatically shifts to the next one in line. Players progress through the dungeon via doors which can be entered by holding up or down on the D-pad, according to the direction highlighted on the player's compass. Items, weapons and gold can be obtained using an action menu initiated with Select. Combat consists of getting up close to an enemy and repeatedly pressing the B button to attack. Simplistic as it may seem, the battle system is one of the worst aspects of the game, as the hit detection is so poor that it's nearly impossible to inflict any damage. Even worse, the controls are extremely dodgy, making it difficult to position yourself correctly to attack. Furthermore, the graphics lack any sort of variety, consisting of the same indistinct gray corridors throughout the game, while the music and sound are both bland and repetitive. One of the worst games of its kind.

Reflections: Widely considered to be one of the worst NES games ever made, *Heroes of the Lance* is more than deserving of its reputation. As a side-scrolling action game, the clunky controls and faulty hit detection make it nearly unplayable, and by only having one playable character at a time, it also fails to provide anything close to an authentic RPG experience. While there are many quality RPGs for the NES, this will certainly never be mistaken as one of them. – JP

Advanced Dungeons & Dragons: Hillsfar

Genre: Action-RPG
Release Date: Nov. 1993
Developer: SSI, Westwood Associates
Ported by: Marionette
Publisher: FCI
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★



Based in the Forgotten Realms campaign setting, this RPG begins by allowing players to create a single character from four classes: Fighter, Thief, Mage, and Cleric. Players will then travel to the city of Hillsfar in search of fame and fortune. Within the city, players must report to their respective guild as determined by their character class. These guilds are responsible for assigning quests to the player, which must be completed in order for the game to progress. Each guild has a different set of quests; for example, the Fighter's Guild requires you to compete at archery, while the Mage's Guild tasks you with exploring a haunted mansion. Between quests, players may visit one of several taverns in the city, which provide gameplay hints in the form of rumors and gossip. While most of the game is presented from an overhead perspective, travel between destinations on the world map is handled through a side-scrolling sequence where the player must attempt to duck and jump obstacles in the road on horseback. Failure to avoid an obstacle, such as a bird or a pothole, will result in being thrown from the horse, and repeated failures will eventually cause the mount to flee, leaving the player stranded. These sequences make up a large portion of the game, but the delayed jumping controls make them very difficult to complete. The graphics are bland, most notably within the city itself, and the gameplay is uninspired, with neither the story nor the combat for which RPGs have become so well known. One of the poorest examples of an RPG on the NES.

Reflections: As one of a handful of *D&D*-licensed games ported to the NES, *Hillsfar* did not turn out well in this incarnation. The game consists of tedious fetch quests as directed by your guild, and although you're mostly free to explore the city, you'll quickly find that there's nothing much worth doing. An RPG that misses the mark on so many levels. – JP

Advanced Dungeons & Dragons: Pool of Radiance

Genre: RPG
Release Date: Apr. 1992
Developer: SSI
Ported by: Marionette
Publisher: FCI
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

A port of one of the original "Gold Box" games developed for the PC, this traditional *D&D*-licensed game follows a group of adventurers who must vanquish an evil spirit known as Tyranthraxus, who has possessed the body of a bronze dragon. Players create a party of characters from a variety of races (Human, Elf, Half-Elf, Dwarf, Halfling) and classes (Fighter, Wizard, Cleric, Thief). Multi-class options are also available for nonhuman characters, which combine the abilities of as many as three different classes into one. Up to five characters may travel with the party at one time. The game utilizes a first-person perspective with a 3D representation of the environment. Players begin in the city of New Phlan, which is comprised of various taverns, item and weapon shops, and even a training hall where players can level up, engage in duels, or hire new characters. Battles in the dungeons occur randomly, with the game shifting to an overhead view. Players have complete freedom of movement in these turn-based encounters, and may attack or retreat as needed. This lends a deeper level of strategy to the game, allowing players to maneuver weak or wounded characters out of harm's way. While the graphics aren't stellar, the battle system is exceptional, but navigating the 3D environment tends to be confusing, with too many identical looking hallways and doors. Although the game does provide you with a map, there are no markers to show you where things are, leaving you to simply guess your way around, or else draw your own map. Despite these faults, the game is arguably the most accurate example of a D&D-style adventure on the NES.

Reflections: Given the reputation of the *D&D* games on the NES, I was actually surprised by this one. The "Gold Box" D&D games were very well received on the PC, and while not a fantastic port, *Pool of Radiance* is at least a serviceable RPG. I appreciated the tactical applications of the combat, but the map system and the layout of the city could have used a little extra work. – JP

Adventure Island

***Adventure Island Classic** (PAL)*
Genre: Platformer
Release Date: Sept. 1988
Developer: Hudson Soft
Publisher: Hudson Soft
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⋆

Master Higgins must rescue Princess Leilani by battling through eight island worlds in this light-hearted platformer. The player must get past various creatures and obstacles such as birds, snakes, frogs, boulders, etc., either by avoidance or by defeating them with a throwing ax which can be obtained from an egg. Eggs throughout the levels also can contain items such as limited invincibility, a more powerful fireball weapon, and a skateboard which enables Higgins to travel faster and jump farther (but is constantly in motion). Some of these eggs are hidden, however, so players should be wary of hitting thin air with a weapon, as that may mean one is there. The twist to this platformer is that besides death by enemy touch or falling into pits, the player must also be wary of an energy meter which constantly dwindles. If the meter empties, the player loses a life, but it can be replenished by collecting fruit which appears consistently in the levels. In some eggs, an eggplant will appear and drain Higgins' energy quickly, forcing the player to rush on. This sense of urgency the energy meter presents keeps the game moving at a good clip and requires the player to rely more on reflexes versus patience in moving forward, especially when faced with some precarious pitfall sequences. Unfortunately, the level backgrounds and enemies don't really vary from world to world, and the enemy bosses at the end of each world are all similar, save for different heads. Those shortcomings aside, the colorful/cute graphics, smooth controls, and upbeat music make for a charming and somewhat unique platformer experience.

Reflections: This title was a port/adaptation of *Wonder Boy*, which appeared in the arcade as well as on the Sega Master System. Besides swapping out the main character, the games are largely identical. After the first game, the series are radically different from one another. I used to love this game as a kid, and ended up renting it at least a few times. However, I was absolutely terrible at it, barely being able to make it that far into the second world. As an adult, I've fared much better, but that has only lead to disappointment since I've been able to discover that the worlds basically repeat the stages. *Super Mario Bros.* this is not. However, it's still the start of a very good series that would also spill over onto the SNES as well as the TurboGrafx-16. Bless the Hudson Bee! – PC

Adventure Island II

***Adventure Island Part II** (PAL)*
Genre: Platformer
Release Date: Feb. 1991
Developer: Now Production
Publisher: Hudson Soft
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

Master Higgins returns to take on island critters like octopuses, snakes, and birds and save the Princess's sister in this side-scrolling sequel. This time out, Higgins again can crack open eggs to gain items to help get to the end of stages. Inside these eggs will be the primary ax weapon, the skateboard to help Higgins go faster, and one of four different dinosaur friends that Higgins can ride on. The four dinosaurs have different attacks (fire attack, whipping tail, etc.) and movement abilities, like one that can swim underwater and another that can fly. At the end of each stage, the player will have the ability to save whatever power-ups are retained for use on later levels, enabling player choice in how to tackle different stages. The returning trademark of the game, having to constantly grab food items to maintain an energy meter to prevent death, returns, however here it drains at a slower rate. Also, each stage is fairly short, almost totally eliminating that danger. However, the one-hit deaths and many pitfalls are still something the player must contend with. Other upgrades from the original game include more refined graphics, a nicer presentation with an overhead map showing progress in between stages, and a different and more interesting array of enemy bosses.

Reflections: It's a nice surprise that Hudson Soft (the Bee!) decided to outsource development for the sequel, as it resulted in some fresh gameplay elements that really added to this second installment of the series. Being able to see a much larger chunk of the screen at one time (let alone being able to travel backwards) enables speed-running levels much more easily. The dinosaurs are a hoot to play with, if they are a bit overpowered, and even the troublesome skateboard is made easier to traverse the levels with. And thank ROB that the enemy bosses are different and interesting, and not just carbon copies of one another like in the original. – PC

Adventure Island 3

Genre: Platformer
Release Date: Sept. 1992
Developer: Now Production
Publisher: Hudson Soft
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★⋆

In the final platforming, side-scrolling island adventure on the NES, Master Higgins must rescue girlfriend Tina, this time kidnapped by aliens. Controls are the same as the predecessors, with B being used to attack and speed run and A used to jump around with a slight momentum-based system. Built upon the very solid foundation of the sequel in both look and feel, this third installment once again has the player platforming and attacking island enemies while trying to eat fruit and veggies to prevent Higgins' hunger meter from draining completely. Along with the standard ax weapon, this title adds a boomerang that's available inside some eggs. Besides the skateboard, returning power-ups are the four handy dinosaur helpers, plus a new fifth type – a Triceratops with a spinning attack. Like the sequel, all power-ups can be stored after stages and re-activated for later ones. The challenge this time out is more difficult, as there are much more varied enemy types with more difficult attack patterns to contend with. The hunger meter drains more quickly than before as well, which makes traversing the longer levels more of a struggle and a more balanced gameplay experience. Other added improvements include more varied level environments (to go along with more enemy types), bonus stage areas (including a fun surfing mode), and the ability for Master Higgins to finally duck. The controls remain very solid, with the ability to run and deftly jump and platform effectively. On the NES, this tropical franchise ends on a very strong and fun note, and it's doubtful that taking out island snakes, snails, and octopuses with an ax will ever be as fun as this.

Reflections: Master Higgins should start going to meetings for Video Game Heroes Who Allow Their Female Companions to Be Constantly Kidnapped Anonymous (VGHWATFCTBCKA). If you're an island girl, why would you associate with Higgins, especially with the threat of being snatched away lurking at every turn? Is it the cute belly paunch? The trucker hat? The fact that maybe no other male humans exist on the Adventure Island resort? How can I replicate whatever is obviously working for Pimp Higgins? On a less comical note, it truly saddens me that Hudson Soft no longer exists anymore as a developer or a publisher. They were always the alternative voice for platformers such as this franchise or something like the Bonk series. Konami has owned the rights to the Hudson Soft properties for years now, but there hasn't been even a peep about resurrecting any of Hudson Soft's beloved franchises, or even a one-off great strategy game like *Military Madness*. Let's go, Konami! Or let me trade you a few of my spare *Super Mario / Duck Hunt* carts for the rights back to *Bomberman*! – PC

Adventures in the Magic Kingdom

Genre: Action
Release Date: June 1990
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⋆

Help Mickey get the parade started by finding six silver keys in this Disney adventure centered around different mini-games and play styles. Five different levels based on classic Disneyland rides form the bulk of the game and a trivia quest serves as the sixth challenge. The overhead 8-bit representation of the park is fun to explore but the games based on the rides are a real mixed bag. Space Mountain doesn't capture the ride experience much at all and is a simple "follow the button" input game to keep from crashing. Thunder Mountain is fast-paced and involves switching to different tracks. Problematically, this is entirely memory based as the dead ends are totally unknown until you hit them. Pirates of the Caribbean and Haunted Mansion fare the best as cute little mini-platformers that do a great job of capturing their ride's theme. Lastly, Autopia is a decently fun vertical racer. In all, it's a cute title and certainly not devoid of fun, but the whole game could best be described as uneven. Disney fans may be more forgiving in their play through.

Reflections: I love the Disney games on the NES and I do play this one from time to time, but it's certainly the least polished. I like the concept and how it fits in perfectly with the idea of exploring a theme park, but some of these levels, especially Space Mountain, deserved a bit better. – IF

The Adventures of Bayou Billy

Genre: Beat 'em Up, Action
Release Date: June 1989
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Konami
Players: 1
Special Features: Zapper (optional)
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★

The player takes on the role of Billy, a Louisiana swamp man trying to rescue his girlfriend in this unique beat 'em up game that also features shooting and driving stages. Unfortunately, none of the three game types are that fun. While the game looks good and sounds great (the soundtrack and voice samples shine), it doesn't exactly play well. The fighting stages are a chore to get through, due to the fact that Billy's attacks (punches, kicks, jump-kicks) are very underpowered and the enemy thugs are extremely overpowered. Taking out enemies becomes somewhat of a burden, as trying to stay out of danger and avoid damage when defeating enemies (for example: the gators) removes any semblance of fun from the mode. Available items and weapons (stick, knife, whip, gun) may help you through, but you'll soon discover that even the common enemies can take just as much punishment as you can, and they are relentless in their attacks. The average driving stages have you trying to avoid or shoot enemy cars before the time runs out while also dodging or lobbing dynamite at planes and helicopters that drop bombs. Here, a mere single hit from them or driving into the rocks in the road will blow up your jeep, forcing you to try again. The scrolling, polished first-person shooter stages have you take out enemy gunman and helicopters (with optional Zapper support) while shooting icons for more ammo and health. The driving and shooting stages fare a bit better, but unfortunately these are just respites between the overly frustrating fighting stages.

Reflections: Everyone and their brother was excited for this game when it was first released. Fighting, driving, AND shooting all in the same game? Sign us up! Unfortunately, when most kids found that they were tearing their hair out trying to get past the first level, I'm sure that excitement quickly dimmed. Every publisher, even Konami, has to have a dog, and this could be their worst release on the NES. Still, it's a memorable game, and thinking of the commercial with the live action Bayou Billy trapped in the jaws of a rubbery gator still makes me chuckle. – PC

Adventures of Dino Riki

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Sept. 1989
Developer: Hudson Soft
Publisher: Hudson Soft
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⯪

As Dino Riki, players set out to battle through four stages of prehistoric shooter. Dino Riki starts out throwing stones to defend himself as he scrolls vertically in the stages while being able to move in all directions. Cute, flying enemies attack in patterns, while ground enemies also shoot projectiles. Dino Riki doesn't move nor attack that well to begin with, but numerous power-ups of several types are available by shooting stationary ground objects. Amongst these are power-ups for speed increasing, restoring health, increasing the health bar, the ability to fly, and attack upgrades (axes, boomerangs, and torches). Speed and power upgrades are essential if the player is to have a chance, as enemies will often swarm on the screen, making avoidance of them all difficult. If a player is hurt, both speed and attack capabilities will be degraded, so the player will have to quickly battle back and regain the upgrades again or else risk losing a life. The player also has the ability to jump over obstacles and enemies, but it seems the real reason it was included in the game was for extraneous and cumbersome platforming areas of stages where making precise jumps is extremely difficult, especially if the player has gained the maximum speed power-ups. This kills any momentum or flow the game may try to convey, and makes the game more of a drag than it should be. Controls and gameplay are very smooth, and this has a fun theme, but all-in-all this game is as shaky as the ground when a T. Rex stomps.

Reflections: There aren't many unique NES shooters, but *The Adventures of Dino Riki* definitely is one of them. I love Hudson Soft and usually they can do no wrong in my eyes, but the platforming areas are an absolute killer, and most likely a case of the developers going just one step too far in wanting to make the game stand out. Sure, it's a fun shooter, but why not include platforming pitfalls as well! Why not? I'll tell you know why... it doesn't work!

The manual states the game's plot: "A courageous and intelligent young man, Dino Riki, is determined to establish mankind's future in this violent age." Why wait for a giant asteroid and a massive change in climate to wipe out everything during the Jurassic period? Let's just have ol' Dino throw flaming torches in all the soon-to-be extinct animals' faces! That's the courageous and intelligent approach! – PC

The Adventures of Gilligan's Island

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: July 1990
Developer: Human Entertainment
Publisher: Bandai
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

Four episodes (stages) of island exploration await in this free roaming adventure game. Players take control of the Skipper with Gilligan in tow, who follows the Skipper around and converses with him via text. The object of each timed episode is to speak to the other shipwrecked members (Mary Ann, the Professor, and Mr. & Mrs. Howell) and seek out objects that they require by finding them on the island, in a cave, by having Gilligan climb a tree, or by defeating the episode boss, like a gorilla. The Skipper is armed with a punch or a found club to fend off snakes, tigers, birds, headhunters, and other adversaries. Food, extra time, and rope can be collected randomly on the island. The rope item is useful to bring Gilligan back to the Skipper if they are separated, since that can occur if Gilligan is trapped on a prior screen, falls into a hole, falls off a bridge, etc. If that happens, the Skipper has two minutes to be reunited with Gilligan or else the game ends. Exploring the island stages can be fun, but the action of fighting and avoiding enemies isn't that well done or particularly exciting, as hit detection isn't the best and rehashing the same areas of the island traveling back and forth can be tiresome. The game's writing is sharp, though, and reflects the humor and spirit of the television series quite well. Overall, it's not the most engaging game, but may be fun for fans of the legendary show.

Reflections: It is pretty clear that the show producers must have had some hand in the development of the game, since the writing of the characters is strong and accurate to the original show. Very conspicuous in her absence is Ginger, "the movie star." In real life, actress Tina Louise publicly despised the show she was a part of, at times lambasting the show's producer and the star Bob Denver. I'm guessing that's why it was decided to leave the character out of the game, which is a shame. And if you wanted to know, when it comes to the "Mary Ann or Ginger?" question, I tend to choose Ginger... but it's close! – PC

Adventures of Lolo

Genre: Action, Puzzle
Release Date: Apr. 1989
Developer: HAL Laboratory
Publisher: HAL America
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

Puzzle through danger-filled rooms as Lolo in an attempt to rescue Princess Lala from the King of Darkness. Players control the blue ball fella through overhead rooms while attempting to collect all of the heart icons on screen. Once the heart containers are collected, a treasure chest will open containing a jewel to the next level. This also causes the enemies to occasionally go nuts, creating a stressful mad dash for the treasure. Each room's layout is a carefully designed puzzle. These are made from the placement and types of enemies, various terrains like water (which can be crossed in specific ways), and sand, which dictates where certain enemies can and can't go. Lolo's main attack, an egg shot, is even carefully limited per the needs of the stage, so playing this as an action game will not get the player anywhere. These shots are gained as Lolo collects certain hearts in the room, and they allow him to temporarily engulf an enemy in a shell. In this state, enemies can be pushed around to block other enemies, or even be used to cross water or ride a current around the screen. If Lolo has another shot in stock, a second one will blast the enemy off screen. Most screens often have a few blocks that may be pushed around to blockade enemy fireballs or to create a safe path on which to travel after grabbing the last heart. In the later, more complex stages, Lolo can even gather hammers and bridges with limited uses to smash blocks or create a permanent river crossing. Enemies are pleasantly varied in design and behavior, and despite the fairly basic graphics, are well visualized. Medusas will kill Lolo any time he crosses her unblocked line of sight, Armadillos will snooze when they collide with Lolo (potentially creating an unwinnable situation), and snakes basically just sit there looking pointless until you realize moving one of them strategically is key to level completion. It is possible to get trapped in unwinnable situations but pressing the Select button will reset the room at the cost of a life. Given that the game is set up in bite-sized chunks, this is not a huge deal breaker. This is a wonderful puzzler with equal parts peaceful pondering and frantic action, with plenty of satisfaction once a solution comes together.

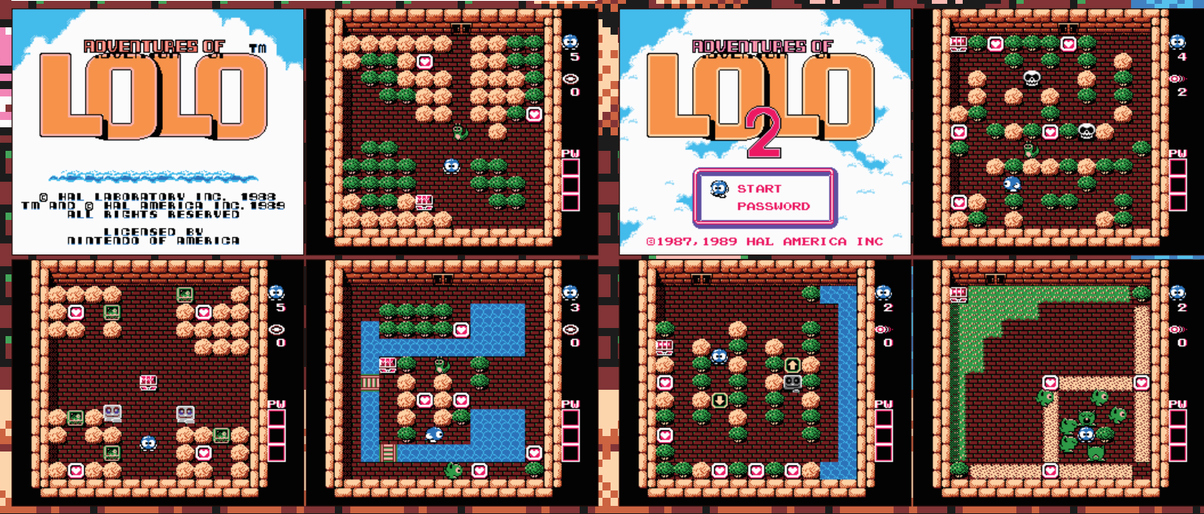
Reflections: The first and only time I ever remember using the "Notes" section in a manual was for this game, as my mother and I made sure to save every screen of progress. The series began life on the MSX computer in Japan as *Eggerland*. – IF

Adventures of Lolo 2

Genre: Action, Puzzle
Release Date: Apr. 1990
Developer: HAL Laboratory
Publisher: HAL America
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★

Lolo must once again rescue Lala from the King of Darkness, giving players a reason to tackle 50 more puzzling rooms in his castle. Players are presented with single screen rooms they must snatch a treasure from before being allowed into the next stage. Obstacles range from monsters with very specific purposes, different terrain such as water and sand that have different properties, and the player themselves, as rash thinking is often punished with a room being unwinnable (pressing Select kills poor Lolo and resets the room). Rooms also contain hearts, all of which must be collected, and a treasure chest that opens once the last heart is collected that contains the jewel needed for Lolo to proceed. Lolo does this with the ability to push around blocks, creating a danger free, mostly, path to victory. Aiding in that endeavor is Lolo's main attack, egg shots, which are very limited and determined by the room. These can turn monsters into eggs, which temporarily cannot hurt you and can be pushed around to aid in blocking in enemies, crossing rivers, and more. Enemies can also be eliminated from the screen with a second shot, although this too is temporary. As far as sequels go, almost nothing was added to this game outside of a surprisingly out of place final boss fight, new stages, and a creepier intro animation. The power-ups, items, and enemies all remain the same. Even the graphics appear to be entirely lifted from the first entry. However, this doesn't much matter for someone entering the series through this version. The mechanics hold up just the same as the original, and the title still remains a fantastic bit of brain-exercising fun.

Reflections: As a kid, I expected sequels to always be bigger and better or at least different. I was pretty disappointed then when I played this and it was nearly indistinguishable from the original. I'm not sure what I had wanted, and I'm obviously quite glad now that it hadn't turned into some platformer or whatever the heck my young brain thought it should have been. – IF



Adventures of Lolo 3

Genre: Action, Puzzle
Release Date: Sept. 1991
Developer: HAL Laboratory
Publisher: HAL America
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★⯪

In this definitive, final installment of the puzzle action series, players will again move Lolo through overhead puzzle rooms populated by carefully placed enemies, environmental hazards, and helpful items. This creates what can feel like an action game but is far more of a puzzle game with often only one solution. Players must watch enemy patterns and focus on the land layout as they carefully collect all of the heart containers, followed by a treasure chest, to advance to the next stage. The main methods used to solve the puzzles are the same as before: carefully restricted egg shots and movable blocks. Egg shots allow Lolo to turn enemies into useful eggs which can be pushed around to make a raft or to block other monsters, or can be doubled up to eliminate them from the screen temporarily. Movable blocks often dot the rooms and are generally Lolo's first line of defense when it comes to figuring out how each room works. This iteration has some great additions that help the game feel like a more fleshed-out experience. First is a world map, bright and colorful, that creates a sense of a world these characters live in, instead of a series of similarly themed rooms. Each location, from caves to towers, contains its own set of levels, and each set is roughly the same difficulty throughout. This makes a game that is friendlier for new players, as the first few levels nail down the basic mechanics, but are a breeze for veterans as they won't spend much time retreading the same ground. There are now infinite lives, which makes perfect sense, since continuing via password made that moot in previous editions. Players have the option of playing Lala, who managed to not get kidnapped, which is a neat touch despite both characters behaving the same. There are a few new enemies, including bosses, encouraging players to figure out patterns and fire off shots when the timing is right. Thankfully, players do not have limited ammo in these sections. Most importantly, the amount of levels here is more than double previous iterations (110), making this a very complete game with loads of depth and incredibly tricky puzzles in the later stages.This is a clever and imaginative game, the likes of which has not been seen since.

Reflections: I'd like to see a modern take on this style of gameplay. Off the top of my head, only this and *Kickle Cubicle* explored the action/puzzle genre in the mainstream. This cart was one of the most expensive I bought when I collected, running me about $30 dollars in the late 1990s. It was worth every penny at the time and could be obtained for a not too dissimilar price now. – IF

The Adventures of Rad Gravity

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: Dec. 1990
Developer: Interplay Productions
Publisher: Activision
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★

Kakos, an artificial intelligence called a "compumind," has been unearthed on the futuristic planet Quark. It informs heroic space cadet Rad Gravity that he must find the other lost compuminds to reestablish the unification of peoples across three star systems. Beginning with the coordinates of a single planet, the duo set out on their side-scrolling adventure. At each location, Rad encounters platforming stages full of enemies and puzzle elements. The goal of a stage is not always clear, but it often involves accessing a computer for more coordinates or collecting an item that Rad returns to the ship by using the communicator from the START menu. The latter action also lets Rad bail out of a stage early to refill his health, represented by energy units at the top. As he unveils more of the nearby planets, going back to the ship additionally allows him to select a different location to explore. Rad begins with a sword to attack the robots, slimes, evil birds, and other enemies that inhabit the strange worlds of Sauria, Vernia, Cyberia, and more. By exploring the planets, Rad can upgrade his melee weapon as well as acquire a few long-range options. Furthermore, there are extra energy units to increase his maximum health and items that improve his mobility. This title is a great marriage of platforming, action, and puzzle solving. The graphics give each world a distinct look, and with their varied gravity levels affecting Rad's jump height, each world feels different, too. A unique experience awaits anyone willing to carry out Rad Gravity's adventure, and with unlimited continues, it's accessible to a wide audience of potential spacefarers.

Reflections: They're no Luke Skywalker and R2-D2, but Rad Gravity and Kakos make quite the pair. I love the presentation of this game - from the comic-strip style of the manual to the goofy-headed protagonist to the de-emphasis on fighting enemies. The controls are a little loose and take some getting used to, but you have the time - there's never a rush in the levels, and you can always go back to the ship to try again. There are also many secret areas with extra energy units, new weapons, and other goodies. It's entertaining gameplay coupled with an interesting story that provides a more than engaging experience in a place far, far away. – KY

The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle and Friends

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Dec. 1992
Developer: Radical Entertainment
Publisher: THQ
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★

Players take control of the famous cartoon duo Rocky and Bullwinkle in this fairly standard platformer. Players control both characters at the same time and can switch off between them with the Select button. Both can run, jump, and throw bombs that can be collected on the ground. Enemies are sparse and not too varied, but cartoon antagonists Boris and Natasha show up to toss bombs at the player. Keys must usually be collected on the way to the end of each level. Bullwinkle the moose has the ability to charge with his antlers to attack enemies, and Rocky can fly for a brief time. Using either of these abilities will deplete the player's life meter, which doesn't make much sense in some situations and seems counter-intuitive, like when you have to fly as Rocky to advance or use Bullwinkle's antlers to take out a pesky enemy. Unfortunately, just about every aspect of the game is below average, from the primitive graphics and music, to the shoddy gameplay and poor enemy types. In fact, most of the time the player will just be avoiding bombs either placed on the ground or falling from parachutes, making for a dull experience.

Reflections: I was never a big fan of the *Rocky & Bullwinkle* cartoon, but even I realize that this game does not do the license any justice. Even though the old cartoon was never really visually detailed, that's no excuse for the game having poor detail too. It's almost as if the developers used the cartoon's lack of depth as an excuse to make a subpar game.

By the way, the instruction manual says that to fly as Rocky, you have to input A + B at the same time, but it's actually the same as charging with Bullwinkle – pressing the B button while running. Screw you, manual, for making me play this game more than I had to just to figure out how to properly do it. – PC

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer

Genre: Action
Release Date: Aug. 1989
Developer: Winky Soft
Publisher: SETA
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

Tom Sawyer's daydream adventures through pirate ships and cloud worlds are the setting for this incredibly challenging but still enjoyable game, based on the classic novel. Tom (Huck, if player two) must travel through side-scrolling levels using rocks, which can be thrown in an arc, or limited supplies of slingshot ammo to defeat pirates, octopuses, dragons, and giant mice on their way to Injun Joe's cave. Using these weapons and fast reflexes will be necessary to get through even the first level, as one hit from most enemies is all it will take to put the player out of commission. Collecting 20 "T" icons dropped from enemies will give the player an extra life, however picking up a skull will deduct 10 from the total. Graphics are plain, but the pirate ships, rivers, and other levels are rendered with a simple charm, and the oversized bosses are rather nice. Enemies are rather cutely designed, making them memorable and giving the game some identity. There's even an overhead vertical rafting level for some variety, as well as a short horizontal shooter section where Tom flies on a cloud. The game may be difficult, but patience and timing are rewarded. A solid choice for those looking for a tough title, beatable by reflexes or pattern memorization. The challenge, simple graphics, and odd theme will likely make this a pass for everyone else, however.

Reflections: This is one of my very good friend's most favorite games. I remember staying up quite late at my first apartment watching him try to beat it. I constantly ragged on the game, but I've really warmed up to it over time, even if it probably isn't for everyone. Did you read that, Jon? I like *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. – IF

After Burner

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: 1989
Developer: Sega
Ported by: Sunsoft
Publisher: Tengen
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Common
★★

Take control of an F-14 Tomcat fighter jet and battle enemy planes in this third-person shooter port of the Sega arcade smash. Armed with unlimited vulcan cannon ammo and a large amount of missiles, players must destroy waves of enemy fighters in the sky who will approach from the front or rear. A radar display helps track the enemy jets on their approach. True to its arcade roots, the action is quick and relentless, as the player will constantly be firing at enemies while trying to avoid enemy missiles – which present the biggest frustration/challenge of the game. When missiles are fired by the enemy, players have a very small window of time to dodge them by either rolling the jet, trying to maneuver away, or by shooting them down. There seems to be little strategy involved in this aspect of the game, and since the NES does a poor job of replicating the Super Scaler technology of incoming 3D movement from the arcade game, it makes the proposition more of a crapshoot than it should be. This can lead to very short, frustrating play sessions instead of something that should have been somewhat more enjoyable.

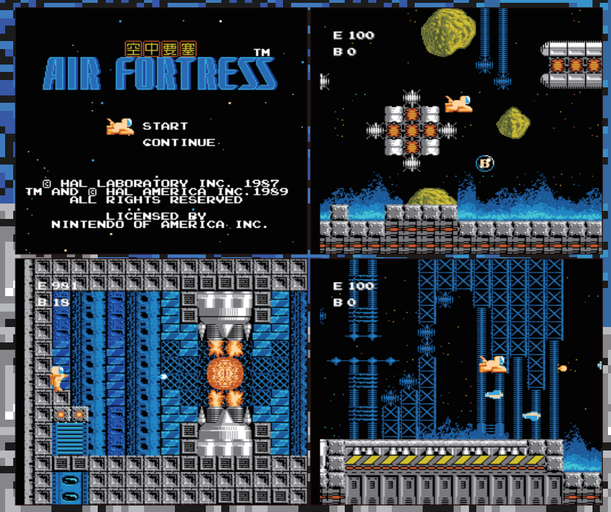
Reflections: A Sega game on a Nintendo system? What madness is this?! Actually, it's a blessing in disguise that Tengen (Atari) ran afoul of Nintendo of America during the *Tetris* controversy and lockout chip patent lawsuit. When they lost their publishing license, Tengen no longer had to care about what they could release on the NES stateside. Before, getting a Sega game on the NES was as likely as cramming an Atari 2600 game into your console and being able to play it. But after the lawsuit, the US could be blessed with decidedly average ports of Sega arcade games much too powerful to be translated faithfully on the NES. Thanks, Atari/Tengen! – PC

Air Fortress

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Sept. 1989
Developer: HAL Laboratory
Publisher: HAL America
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★

Destroy the eight alien strongholds in this blend of horizontal shooter and action game. The first half of every level is a shooter where the player guides a ship to the airlock of each fortress. During these segments, players can collect extra energy, which is useful for the fortress portions, and take out waves of incoming ships and certain abstract enemies. These segments feel slow, however, and are never particularly exciting. Once inside the fortress, the player leaves the ship and can float around screen at will. Doing so drains energy, but all energy lost by movement regenerates while standing still. Colliding with enemies and hazards will do permanent damage that cannot be recharged without power-ups. The objective here is to navigate these increasingly complex mazes, destroy the cores, and then find the exit and move on to the next base. The controls in these sections never feel great, and attacks have recoil which sends the player back with each shot. This recoil feels very odd and may never really gel with the player. Bases themselves all look the same for the most part, which kind of eliminates some of the excitement of progression. The concept of the game is novel, but the execution never amounts to anything better than a mediocre and sometimes annoying experience.

Reflections: I like games that mix shooter gameplay with adventuring, and I generally enjoy HAL releases in general, but everything about this title is boring and repetitive, with just enough questionable design decisions to make it tough to suggest. The best part of the game may be that the spaceperson doesn't ride in their ship during the shooter segments, but rather they ride on it. Baller. – IF



Airwolf

Genre: Shooter, Simulation
Release Date: June 1989
Developer: Beam Software
Publisher: Acclaim Entertainment
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

This misfire of a helicopter combat game is based upon the hit '80s action television show. In an attack chopper armed with machine guns and limited missiles, in first-person perspective, players have to fight off numerous jets that fire missiles at you while rescuing hostages (primary objective) and taking out airfield towers (secondary objective) that are marked on your HUD map. Firing on and taking out towers is fairly simple. However, fighting off the respawning waves of enemies can be tedious. When reaching a hostage location, the player will have to lower the helicopter to the ground while avoiding towers on the side in a horizontal, single-screen mini-game, while adjusting for wind. Players have to be wary of both taking damage and dwindling fuel during the missions. A similar mechanic to rescuing hostages is in place to refuel and repair the copter, with the player having to lower and land between two stacks of fuel drums to reach a repair truck. The mission ends when the player flies out of the map area after rescuing all the hostages. What could have been a fine experience is a mess thanks to dodgy controls that don't really allow you to engage or defend against the jets, an almost constant swarm of enemies, and a lack of mission variety. The game experience amounts to blasting rapidly and wildly from target to target, with nary a semblance of strategy while trying to fly to mission objectives. The required mini-games are also almost insulting in their simplicity, and seem to have been added just to have something different to go along with the rest of the tiring experience.

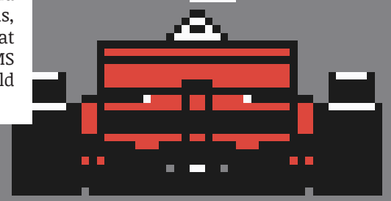
Reflections: I'm wondering what nefarious region of the world *Airwolf* takes place in, since all the hostages there are voluptuous, red-haired women (might be time to plan a vacation). Also, great idea trying to land between TWO GIANT STACKS OF FUEL DRUMS when refueling. Was there nowhere else around where you could attempt a landing? – PC

Al Unser Jr.'s Turbo Racing

***Turbo Racing** (PAL)*
Genre: Racing
Release Date: Mar. 1990
Developer: Data East
Publisher: Data East
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★

This third-person perspective F-1 racing game features two time trial modes and a 16 race circuit season mode. In time trials, players race for the best lap either against computer opponents or on an empty track. In season mode, players can practice a circuit, qualify for position, ask Al Unser Jr. for advice, and finally race. There is a good amount of variety here in terms of track layout, but the racing action itself is a bit boring. All shifting is manual. Holding shift after third gear activates a nitro booster, which is really cool, but is sadly the biggest key to victory. Downshifting on turns is rarely necessary and this makes the varied courses feel much more similar to one another. Playing as the default Unser Jr. team makes the game a cakewalk, with available maxed out stats in six categories for the F-1 car (Speed, Acceleration, Durability, Suspension, Pit Crew Speed, and Turbo). Otherwise, starting as a new team can be frustrating, since the starting points to customize the player's car are only 20 out of 60, although more points can be earned on the circuit. The game appears promising at first, and the sense of speed conveyed is nice, but a number of small issues really weigh it down.

Reflections: The game imbalances itself to such a degree with the Unser Jr. team that it makes what could have been its best feature, creating your own team with colors and all, an option only the masochistic would undertake. The advice Al gives is pretty useful for a nondriver such as myself, if it was applied to an entirely different game where shifting and lines mattered. – IF



Alfred Chicken

Genre: Platformer
Release Date: Feb. 1994
Developer: Twilight
Publisher: Mindscape
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★★

Alfred the chicken sets out to battle the Meka-Chickens who have kidnapped his animal pals and girlfriend Floella. The objective of each platforming level is to have Alfred locate and peck all of the balloons in order to float up and reach the end of the stage. At that point, Alfred will arrive at a bonus area or engage in a shooter boss battle. Alfred must explore various rooms of each stage connected via doorways and activate symbol-coded switch blocks via buttons in order to gain access to other areas of the level to continue on. Exploration of stages is encouraged, as bonus items are available as well as diamonds that can be acquired to gain an extra life. A single enemy touch or Alfred running into level dangers such as bombs or spikes will end his life, so players must be careful and on their chicken toes. Alfred can jump around levels with great control, float down via wing flapping, and can dive bomb onto enemies with his beak to destroy them. Controls are very precise, which makes it fun to jump and bounce around the levels and on the many springs which will throw Alfred high into the air. The experience is boosted by some nice, bouncy tunes, which are reflective of its lighthearted tone. There is a slight learning curve, and the challenge is above average, but you can do a lot worse for an inventive and oddly charming platforming experience.

Reflections: Originally on the Game Boy, *Alfred Chicken* was one of many late NES casualties in which the game publisher produced roughly 10 times more of the SNES version than the NES version. It's a shame, since those hanging on to their dusty NES's were overlooked and therefore were denied some good titles due to a lack of marketing and stocking of NES games on shelves once you reached 1993 for sure.

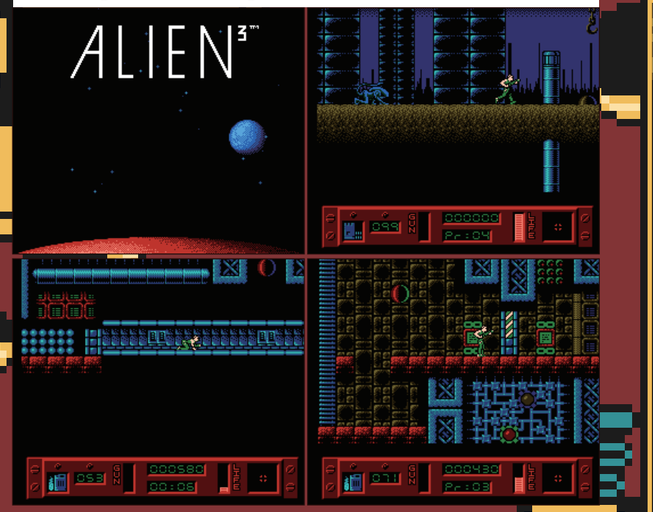
Alfred is a quirky and loveable-looking main character. He's a red chicken with spiky hair! What's not to love? Oh wait, a red male chicken? Wouldn't that be a rooster? So shouldn't this game really be called *Alfred Rooster*? What's going on, developers? I smell a "fowl" conspiracy here. I just slapped my knee so hard that it broke the skin. – PC

Alien³

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Mar. 1993
Developer: Probe Software
Publisher: LJN
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★

Based loosely on the 1992 film, players take control of Ellen Ripley, who must rescue prisoners on each of several levels while fighting aliens. The gloomy and dark free-roaming levels consist of platforms, doors, ladders, and air ducts to be crawled through while attempting to find the prisoners. Armed with a pulse rifle, flamethrower, grenade launcher, and hand grenades, players will have to fight off aliens who will rush at them and spit acid, as well as fend off the small crawling face-huggers. The run-and-gunning aspect of the game feels nice due to the character animations and good controls. The different weapons all have advantages for certain situations, which makes using them and finding/conserving ammo interesting. What kills the experience though is the small amount of time allotted for each level to find the prisoners – usually only a few minutes. It is troubling enough to deal with aliens attacking, but the small amount of time leaves no cushion for sufficiently exploring or for making errors, since the player has to find all the prisoners AND the exit to the level (which isn't marked). After failing, the player will be shown where the leftover hostages were – not that it makes the process any easier. A radar device can be found to help track where the hostages are, but that barely changes the circumstance of having to find the correct path between all the prisoners, since even minimal backtracking in a level can result in the timer running out. Unfortunately, a somewhat polished title with good ideas is ruined by an unreasonable and inflexible structure.

Reflections: *Alien 3* was always a strange choice for a video game, mostly because the characters in the movie didn't have any weapons. So the developers smartly decided to mix in the pulse rifle/flamethrower from *Aliens* to make a title worth playing. I'm a big fan of the SNES version, which features a similar gameplay design and elements, but a much larger environment for the player to explore (with no time limit) as well as several different types of missions for Ripley besides just rescuing prisoners. Not to belabor the point, but what's strange about the NES version is the fact that the time limit is so insanely short, and even changing the difficulty does not extend the length. Was this game play-tested at all? I think a reasonable benchmark for a game being overly difficult is to be able to defeat the first level without dying five times and having to have a map by your side to figure out where to go. – PC



Alien Syndrome

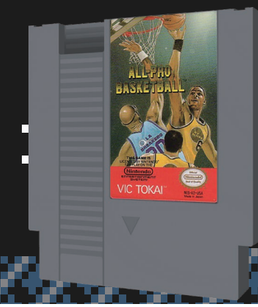
Genre: Run and Gun Shooter
Release Date: 1988
Developer: Sega
Ported by: Sanritsu Denki
Publisher: Tengen
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Common
★★★

One or two players must rescue trapped humans from alien-infested space colonies in this overhead multidirectional shooter. The game has a fairly interesting design, with many variations on slug and worm-like enemies that range from plain to gruesome, disembodied mouths, and blobs of organic evil. Every colony is set to destruct in a certain amount of time in an attempt to provide a tense backdrop for each rescue mission. This isn't particularly successful, however, as powerful weapon upgrades like a flamethrower and maps highlighting trapped humans' locations give the game a surprisingly low difficulty level. There is never a moment where a player would likely be lost, and enemies are generally slow and easy to kill. After rescuing all of the humans, players can use the exit to face each stage's boss. These fights take place on a flat black background to allow for larger, more detailed enemies, like a terrifying head emerging from what appears to be a cocoon. The graphics are decent and the space stations look nice, although not overly varied. While the game is fun for the first few levels, it does get tiresome quicker than one might expect from something that starts so enjoyably. However, there is a cooperative two-player mode that definitely gives the game longer legs, and is a decent way to kill some time with a friend.

Reflections: Playing the first few levels is fun, the graphics are decent, and it's definitely one of the better Tengen ports, but whenever I play this by myself I end up turning it off out of boredom as death never really feels like a threat. Part of this is due to the timer never really being much of a pressure builder, since those nasty xenomorphs were kind enough to post clearly visible placards pointing out the location of every one of their future snacks. – IF

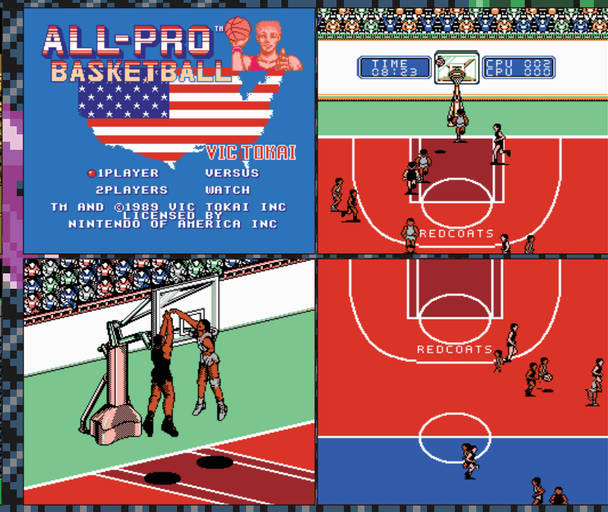
All-Pro Basketball

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Dec. 1989
Developer: Aicom
Publisher: Vic Tokai
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★⋆



In this basketball game, players select one of eight teams (all with different players and stats) and can compete against a friend or the computer by themselves or with a partner. A nice season mode via password is available. The court is viewed from a top-down vertical viewpoint, with the team on offense traveling up. When the other team gets the ball, they will travel down to the half court line, and at that point the game will pause and the screen will flip for the offensive team. This is a little jarring and is hard to get used to. The gameplay doesn't resemble a real basketball game at all, as most baskets are achieved easily via fast breaks since the CPU players for both teams do little to stop players from marching straight towards the basket uncontested for their shot. Pretty slam dunk cutscenes are little consolation for this gameplay shortcoming. Defense is extremely hard to play, since rebounding is difficult and stealing the ball simply happens by chance. However, the computer players seem to steal the ball at will, even if they appear to be nowhere near your dribbling player. There are some nice ideas here, but the execution on screen never lives up to them.

Reflections: My God, can someone play some D here?! There are more fast breaks in this game than when I played two-on-two at my local park as a kid (meaning: a LOT). I don't understand how the AI defense on both sides just runs randomly around and does not even bother to get between the person they are supposed to be defending and the hoop. Did someone play test this sucker and realize that it wasn't common for a typical basketball game to feature roughly 45 slam dunks? – PC



Alpha Mission

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Oct. 1987
Developer: SNK
Publisher: SNK
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

This basic vertical space shooter arms the player with a ship with separate attacks for ground and air targets. As players fly along the enemy bases, the goal is to shoot the incoming waves with standard fire and expose power-ups using air-to-ground missiles on the enemies below. The game presents a large variety of power-ups, which is certainly one of its strong points. There are slow but effective eight-directional shots, forward shots that also launch a series of balls that spread across the screen, lightning bolts, and fire shots. Compared to some other similar shooters of the time, this is quite impressive, but the design of the game is unimaginative with plenty of repeating enemies and backgrounds. The somewhat long levels coupled with a lack of checkpoints can make for a repetitive and frustrating experience. This isn't the worst shooter on the system. In fact, it's certainly playable, but with many more polished options available, there's very little reason to choose this over a number of better titles.

Reflections: Some early SNK titles like *Ikari Warriors* suffer on the NES because the port was poor or lacking a key control feature. *Alpha Mission* fails simply by not being very fun, which is rare for SNK. The Japanese title is *Armored Scrum Object* which bumps it at least half a star in theory. – IF

Amagon

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Apr. 1989
Developer: Aicom
Publisher: American Sammy
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★⋆

As Amagon the marine, the player must battle through island stages of bees, snakes, spiders, birds, crocodiles, and killer mushrooms (!) in order to get to a boat to escape. The player is armed with a machine gun with limited ammo, although it is possible to obtain more in the levels. The gameplay is very frustrating due to the awkward enemy patterns, one-hit deaths, and enemies that constantly respawn/reappear if the player does not move forward. Jumping is precarious due to it being very quick and the player rocketing back to earth after releasing the A button. Amagon can power up to a muscle-bound hulk of a man named Megagon by obtaining a power-up available in the level and hitting the Select button. This change gives the player a health meter. However, it also results in a limited punch attack and a larger target for the enemies to hit. A strange, optional projectile attack seemingly emitted from the armpit of Megagon will reduce the player's health bar. Enemy bosses are a simple war of attrition and button-mashing to see who drops first, as charging enemies cannot easily be dodged. It's a game filled with various uninspired elements, from the graphics to the gameplay and the enemy design. It's fun for a half minute, but should soon be ejected from the NES.

Reflections: For some reason, I used to think *Amagon* was a quality gaming experience. Maybe I was enamored with the fact that you could roid up in the middle of the game? I'm not sure, but upon revisiting the game I dislike it more and more. On a style note, Amagon's fashion sense isn't exactly befitting for a marine... dark pink shorts and matching tank top? – PC

American Gladiators

Genre: Action, Sports
Release Date: Oct. 1991
Developer: Incredible Technologies
Publisher: GameTek
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★⋆

Based upon the popular athletic television game show, players compete in five different events with different gameplay elements and control schemes in order to eventually get to the final Eliminator event. The events themselves are mini-games that are fairly simplistic. Human Cannonball requires the player to time a jump to a swinging rope and then time a jump off to smack a gladiator off a pedestal. The Wall is a tedious and very difficult vertical climb to avoid obstacles and gladiators who climb after you, an annoying event due to having to tap B and A back and forth to climb, and it being very easy to fall off. The Joust is a side view button-masher where players have to beat gladiators off a pedestal with a pugil stick. Assault has the player attempt to run to and grab weapons to destroy a moving tank turret at the top of the screen while avoiding its shots. Finally, Powerball has the player try and run past defenders to place a ball into cylinder goals for points. None of the events are particularly fun, and most are more difficult than they need to be. The worst part of the experience is that events must be successfully completed to move on, versus a point structure. If you lose all your lives, the game will end, most likely before completing all five events (which cycle to more difficult versions), let alone reaching The Eliminator event, another button masher. While a password system exists, very few will want to use it to play through the same frustrating games over and over again.

Reflections: Unfortunately, the highlight of the game is the hilarious stock sound effects used when you or a gladiator falls off a pedestal during Human Cannonball and the Joust.

Boy, did I love the *American Gladiators* show as a kid. Sure, it was silly, but it was a nice change from the scripted WWE (then WWF) shows that I liked. It was fun seeing the huge, steroid-fueled male "Gladiators" like Nitro and Laser beat up on the competitors, and the lovely female Gladiators like Lace weren't bad either. The variety of the games was not reflected well on the NES, nor was the structure against a competing opponent. I always wished as a kid that I could try a few of the events in real life like Assault, even though I'd most likely be killed if I competed as a chubby child. – PC

Anticipation

Genre: Board Game, Puzzle
Release Date: Nov. 1988
Developer: Rare
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-4 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★⋆

This board game features players trying to guess pictures that are drawn on screen. Players select the difficulty and up to four human and/or computer participants. On the screen, players advance on a three-tiered board with four different colored tiles, each representing one of 16 possible categories of pictures, like clothing, tools, leisure, and music. One at a time, each player will roll a die, and then their piece will land on a colored tile. A picture within that category will then be drawn via connected dots, and any player can buzz in and try to guess what it is by filling in the letters (but be careful, two mistakes/spelling errors end the chance). If a player successfully answers, they will earn that square's/category's color. After earning all four colors, they will advance up to the second tier, and then the third upon earning all four colors again. The player who first earns all four colors on the third and final tier is declared the victor. It's a fine game on the surface, but there are definitely idiosyncrasies. For example, the designations of some puzzles to associated categories are arbitrary head-scratchers, for example "parachute" in the travel category and "tripod" in science. The level of the board and the difficulty also can frustrate, since eventually there will be no dots to help the player nor a category given for the picture. Playing against humans won't cause an issue, but against CPU opponents it can be tough when they guess a picture from only one or two lines drawn. There's also an issue of sufficiently randomizing pictures, as sometimes within a game they will appear twice (albeit reversed). Still, what's presented here can be a good time, with a fun atmosphere and some zesty music to lighten the mood. Best played with friends to maximize the fun factor while poking fun at some of the puzzling and strange pictures.

Reflections: This cart omits the Nintendo "Seal of Approval" that adorns the other licensed NES games, but it's on the back of the box (make of that what you will). This was marketed towards adults, conveyed in the several thirtysomethings on the cover art huddled together, as if they were playing in a closet. As I've gotten older I appreciate this title more, if for nothing else than the pure balls Rare had in coming up with some of the puzzles. Not caring about trademarks in the least, you can see a Sony Walkman as well as a *Space Invaders* alien. Some puzzles are insanely difficult to figure out, like a 3D leaf that's nigh indecipherable, while others are stupidly simple, like a television camera that has "TV" drawn on it. One of the best times I had playing this was with Ian while filming for a *Pat the NES Punk* episode. Off the cuff, we played and riffed on the game, and discovered just how wacky the puzzles are. If I had not played it then, there's a chance this review may have ended up worse. – PC

Arch Rivals: A Basket Brawl!

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Nov. 1990
Developer: Midway
Ported by: Rare
Publisher: Acclaim Entertainment
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⯪

This is a fair home console port of the no fouls arcade basketball game of the same name. Gameplay takes place from a horizontal scrolling perspective with two-on-two action. On offense, it seems to be a standard basketball game with jump shots, dunking, three-pointers, etc., but not on the defensive side. Can't overcome your opponent using basketball prowess? Punch them in the face! Pull their pants down using A + B! Just watch out for the referee whose only purpose is to trip you up if you get too close. Fans will also throw trash from the refreshment stand onto the court in an effort to further hinder any victory efforts. The gameplay here is fairly smooth, and there are a few perks: at the start of the game, the player may choose their team from eight players with different skills such as 3-pointers, speed, and so on. The game is fun, but control feels slippery and games drag on for longer than necessary, making blowouts painful and close games exhausting. It doesn't help that after every made shot, there's a short cutscene showing a coach, the crowd, a cheerleader, or the miniscule ref, grinding the game to a halt. Shattering the backglass with a dunk is always satisfying, however.

Reflections: This was the first arcade machine I ever bought. While the two versions appear to be very close, the port is lacking the control and overall polish that really make a good sports game, whether it be a simulation or a silly representation of the real deal. This was obviously Midway's basis for their wildly successful *NBA Jam* franchise which kept the same basic play format but traded punches for outlandish dunks. – IF

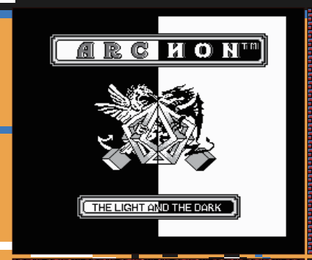
I love the *Mad Magazine* style cartoon cover art. As an aside, the last time I played Ian at this game, I think I beat him by 60 points. – PC

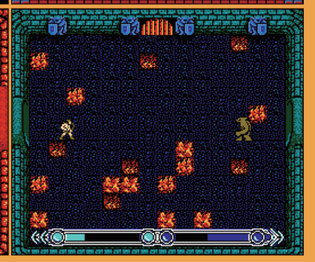
Archon

Genre: Strategy, Action
Release Date: Dec. 1989
Developer: Free Fall Associates
Ported by: Bullet-Proof Software
Publisher: Activision
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

This board game resembles the classic game of chess on the surface: two opposite teams of 16 light and dark pieces square off against each other. Although they have different appearances and names, the two sides' pieces mostly mirror each other. There are eight "pawn" pieces and eight back pieces which are more powerful. Like chess, pieces have different movement range and abilities, like some being able to "jump" other pieces. The difference between this game and chess though is that when a piece enters an enemy's square, the piece is not automatically taken, but rather the game switches to a one-on-one fight to decide the winner. In this gameplay mode, the two pieces move around a battlefield filled with obstacles and attack each other until one remains. The pieces' differences lie in their movement speed, attack power, attack type (melee or projectile), range of attack, amount of health, and length of time to recharge the attack. It is these differences wherein the strategy lies, since though it's not guaranteed that a more powerful piece will win a battle, however odds are definitely increased in what resembles a game of paper-rock-scissors. Each side has a single "king" piece (wizard and sorceress) that can cast spells such as healing other pieces or reviving dead ones. Unlike chess, the game does not end if these pieces are taken, but if one of two conditions are met: either every piece on one side is destroyed, or one side occupies all five glowing squares on the board at the same time. It's a unique and enjoyable board game concept, if lacking in options that would allow more replayability.

Reflections: *Archon* is a great example of a "forgotten" NES game: a title that's not exactly rare, but one that wasn't played by many when it was released and still remains "hidden" for most in present day. One of the great aspects of the annual NES Charity Marathon (besides raising money for children's hospitals) is getting a chance to discover and play games I normally never would. While *Archon* will never be a game that will top my "have to play" list, it's a title that's interesting enough to stand out as one-of-a-kind in the NES library, and for that reason alone I respect the hell out of it. Cheers, Free Fall Associates. Although you were probably producing the highest quality parachutes on the side, I appreciate the effort made in your game development as well. – PC





Arkanoid

Genre: Paddle-and-Ball
Release Date: Aug. 1987
Developer: Taito
Publisher: Taito
Players: 1-2
Special Features: Vaus controller (optional)
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★⯪

Players take control of the Vaus paddle ship in this *Breakout*-style game. The object of each level is to use the paddle to deflect and bounce the ball around the screen to destroy all the colored bricks while preventing the ball from dropping to the bottom of the screen. Silver bricks require two hits to destroy, while the troublesome gold bricks cannot be destroyed and must be played around. Enemies will appear at times who will deflect the ball into another direction if hit, which can cause the player trouble if they have to compensate for the directional change. Occasionally, power-ups will drop from bricks that will extend the Vaus paddle length, slow the ball down, allow the player to stop and fire the ball, split the ball into three, provide a laser to fire at bricks, or even warp to another stage. The player's style and the type of the level may dictate both which power-ups to go for and keep as well as the strategy to take out the level's bricks. For example, it may be smarter on certain levels to try and get the ball up to a top row to bounce and take out bricks as the ball makes its way down. The changing and inventive patterns of the levels prevent the game from getting stale, and the smooth and quick gameplay wraps everything up into a great package. The lack of in-game music may seem like a detriment, but the sounds of the ball hitting the paddle and bricks have a nice, soothing, almost hypnotic effect at times. Note: the game was originally released with an analog Vaus spinner controller, which while not required, is really the true way to play and enjoy the game. For the genre, it doesn't get much better.

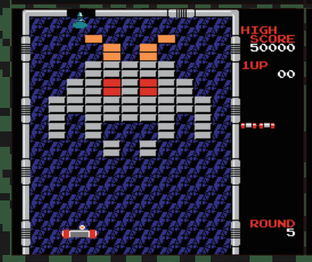
Reflections: There's not a lot of *Breakout*-type games out there, but when you think of the king of the hill of that genre, it's usually *Arkanoid*. Everything about the game itself just screams class, as it's one of those games where everything just seems to fit. There's really nothing superfluous or missing, and the challenge, while high, is not unfair. I was unaware as a kid that the NES version came with the awesome Vaus controller, but if I had known, I probably would have begged my parents to get it. It's just a shame that the controller was not utilized as an option in any other NES game, not even the other paddle-and-ball game *Thunder & Lightning*. You have to applaud Taito though for going well out of their way in producing a one-off controller, which probably hurt their sales somewhat as this would have made the game more expensive by default than all the other NES games on the shelf next to it. – PC

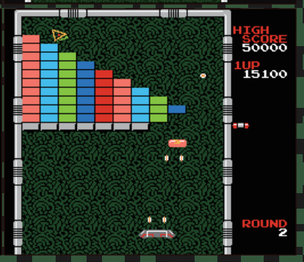
Arkista's Ring

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: June 1990
Developer: NMK
Publisher: American Sammy
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

This overhead action game has players take the elf archer Christine through 125 screens to retrieve the titular ring. The game is interesting in that it fully borrows the RPG aesthetic, but has quick playing, arcade-like levels. Players navigate through mazes taking out all the enemies, from lobsters to trolls to walking flames, with the game's main weapon, Christine's bow. Defeating all the enemies reveals a key that allows the player to progress to the next level. In addition, there are screen-clearing power-ups and magic that can grant the elf a shot that goes through walls. A heart supply is what keeps Christine going. The graphics and enemies change up frequently, and the game does a great job of making the player feel like they are progressing on an adventure from one stage to the next. Gameplay can border on monotonous, however, as it lacks any real depth or puzzle solving. The player can only shoot in four directions, which makes lining up good shots quite tricky in later stages. While the game has its challenging moments, its pace and design create a somewhat low difficulty, and it would be more exciting with a bit more oomph. Despite the negatives, this is a fun and somewhat unique title that should be given a fair chance, as what's here carries a bit of charm.

Reflections: There is something about the structure of this game that I really dig. There are lots of ornamental landscape-like altars, village buildings, and volcanos that serve no real purpose other than to make the game feel more grand than it actually plays out. That's a good bit of work for what amounts to a nice coat of paint. – IF





Astyanax

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Mar. 1990
Developer: Aicom
Publisher: Jaleco
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★⯪

This competent side-scrolling action game features rather large sprites and nice presentation. Players control Astyanax: a 16-year-old boy who is whisked away to save Princess Rosebud in the fantasy kingdom of Remlia. The player's main weapon is an axe, which can be upgraded twice into a spear or a sword, each affecting magic and physical damage differently. This allows different play styles; the spear turns the character into more of a magic wielder, the sword more of a barbarian, and the axe the middle ground. Magic includes binding spells that freeze all enemies and thunderbolts that strike all monsters. Every swing of a weapon empties a power meter which refills quickly. The more the meter is filled when attacking, the stronger the blow. This really lends itself well to learning enemy patterns and picking the right spot to strike. This is important, as the enemies are big and have tricky movements, which gives the player multiple points to strike and a different strategy to employ for certain weapons. Above all, enemies need to be dispatched quickly. There are some areas where hits feel unavoidable, and sections with jumps can feel cheap when enemies appear out of nowhere and attack, as being knocked back can send you quickly into a pit. Despite these issues, this is a fun game with lovely, simple anime cutscenes between levels that really add to the story.

Reflections: So a fairy teleports a teenage boy to a world he's never been, tells him to pick up an ax and go save the princess because, as luck would have have it, her magic only works one way and saving the day is the only way to get back to Earth. Freakin' cold-hearted, that fairy. – IF

The dragon on the cover art seems to be saying, "Hey bro, check out my forearm gains. I've been doing extra reps at the gym!" – PC

Athena

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Aug. 1987
Developer: SNK
Ported by: Micronics
Publisher: SNK
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★⯪

Players control the bored princess Athena, who has magically found herself in a world loosely based on Greek mythology. The game is immediately cute and welcoming with a winking Athena on the title screen and big-headed, goofy sprites populating the levels. Athena starts with only a kick to attack, but she will pick up different weapons and armor quickly as she explores different side-scrolling worlds on her quest to defeat the evil Dante. Each level is colorful, and enemies like horsemen, pigs, and giant purple blobs prime the player for an enjoyable romp. The good ends there, however. Jumping is absurdly messy with one press for a short hop and a second press for a higher one. Weapons don't swing but wiggle, so players must be right on top of an enemy to do damage, and hit detection is poor. Worse, there is no real feedback when Athena takes damage, so players will lose lives without even knowing they've been hit. Everything is a cumbersome mess, and even the initially charming graphics get old as textures and enemies repeat. This is a game that desperately wants to be liked but ends up disappointing, as it lacks any substance to back up its bright, cheery appearance.

Reflections: I'm a sucker for a cute game, so I've often tried to trick myself into believing there was something redeeming about this title. However, taking a purposely critical eye to it has not left me with much positivity. I dig the character, so I'm glad she found eternal life in the *King of Fighters* series, even if I don't play as her much. Stick with her as a chipper brawler. There's nothing to see here. – IF

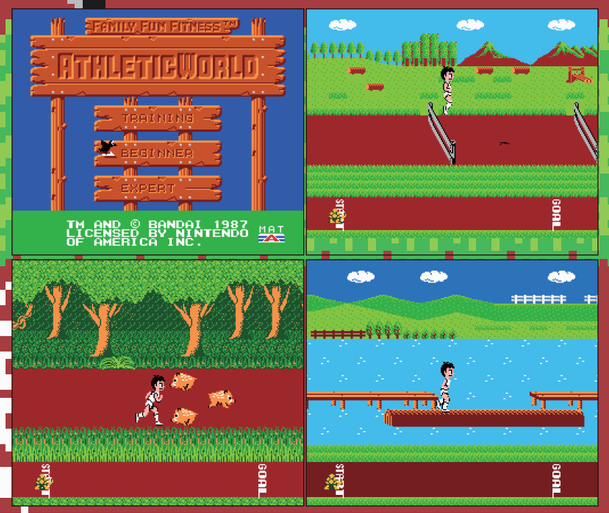
Athletic World

Genre: Sports
Release Date: July 1987
Developer: TRY
Publisher: Bandai
Players: 1
Special Features: Power Pad (required)
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★

Using the Power Pad exercise controller, players can physically run and jump through five different side-scrolling mini-games: Hurdles, Animal Trail, Hop a Log, Rafting, and Dark Tunnel. Hurdles is self-explanatory, Animal Trail is running alongside animals, Dark Tunnel has hills requiring much more running to get up, and Hop a Log requires hopping to advance on logs at points. Rafting is the most interesting, as it requires jumping or ducking while riding along on a river to avoid poles across the water, and moving the raft up and down to avoid stones. Originally the pack-in game included with Bandai's Family Fun Fitness Pad, each challenge is fairly short, meant to show off the abilities of the accessory versus captivating players for an extended period of time. The mini-games vary more in their presentation and background versus actual functionality, but they work fine and the art design is cute. A couple of challenges try and change it up a bit by adding vertical movement and squatting, but it does little to alter the fact that the title is little more than a tech demo, and one without even a multiplayer capability.

Reflections: Bandai's Family Fun Fitness Pad was the predecessor to Nintendo's Power Pad. It was only available for a few months, though, before Nintendo purchased it, took it off the market, and then rebranded and rereleased it. At that point, Athletic World was replaced by World Class Track Meet as the pack-in game by Nintendo, which was probably the proper choice, since that title at least had two-player support. That said, good on Bandai for being creative enough to develop a colorful exercise controller and a publish of games that barely anyone would use on both its and Nintendo's version.

Developer TRY would eventually become Sonata and then finally Human Entertainment. That's right, the same folks responsible for Power Pad games would go on to develop and publish the heralded *Fire Pro Wrestling* game franchise that would appear on Super Famicom, Playstation, Sega Saturn, and other consoles. – PC

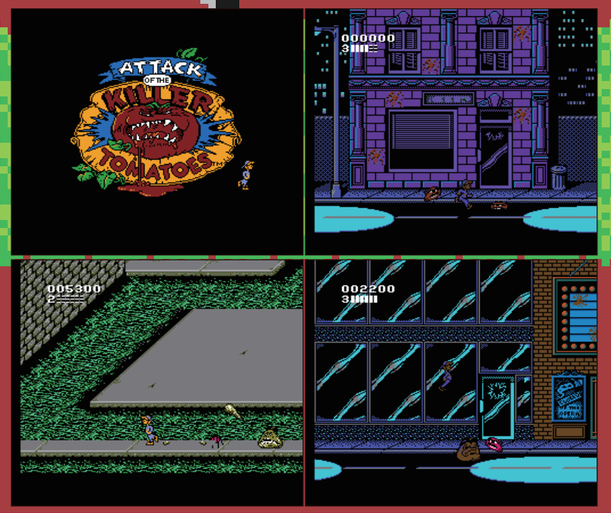


Attack of the Killer Tomatoes

Genre: Platformer
Release Date: Jan. 1992
Developer: Imagineering
Publisher: THQ
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★

Players fight against the killer tomato horde in this platformer based upon the cult film series. Various types of tomato enemies attack the boy player: bouncing tomatoes, small tomatoes, blob tomatoes, slime tomatoes, spider tomatoes, bat tomatoes, and more. The player's sole method of attack is the standard jump and squish, which sometimes will break the tomato into smaller enemies. The erratic bouncing of the enemies, combined with the very precise requirement for stomping them, will result in the player taking hits while attempting to squash tomatoes far more often than it should. It doesn't help matters that the player's character moves at a staccato pace when walking, or that he inexplicably cannot run by using the B button until level three. The levels are not always straightforward, but can veer off into side paths where health packs can be obtained. It's not a bad effort and has a nice concept, but the execution is somewhat lacking.

Reflections: For some strange reason, the cult '70s comedy/horror film *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes* had a renaissance in the late '80s/early '90s, with three additional films and even a children's animated series being produced. The third level of this game actually has a pretty cool section where you reverse gravity and have to jump from the top of the screen to platforms towards the bottom of the screen to escape. It's a great concept that would later appear as a core gameplay element in *Metal Storm*. Kudos, Imagineering, for imagi-engineering that one! – PC



Baby Boomer

Genre: Shooting Gallery
Release Date: 1989
Developer: Jim Meuer
Publisher: Color Dreams
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Zapper (optional)
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★⯪

Control the destiny of little Boomer in this strange light gun game where you must prevent enemies from hurting the continually crawling baby while also shooting objects to lay down a bridge or create a safe pathway. It's a pretty twisted game where spiders, bouncing missiles, mini-devils, and the like are out to commit infanticide against poor Boomer. Besides shooting enemies to prevent them from making Boomer cry, bottles of milk will have to be shot by the player in order to keep Boomer's energy from depleting fully. The hit detection with the Zapper is okay, but some of the enemy movements are quick and there are often too many enemies to properly target at the same time. It's a novel and quirky idea for a game with levels that include a park, an underground mine, a graveyard, and Hell itself. However, for all its good intentions, the game's pieces just don't quite gel well enough in the end. The graphics are of a very simple style, and there are parts of the game where the difficulty is so extreme compared to others that you'll stop caring what bizarre death awaits the infant Boomer.

Reflections: Even though it looks like something drawn with the LJN Video Art system, I like the simple art style of *Baby Boomer*. It's reflective of its PC development roots, and besides some of the other Color Dreams games, doesn't resemble the vast majority of NES titles. If *Baby Boomer* had been tweaked a little bit and had flushed away the multiple pathways and strange choices that make the game very difficult (like milk bats that drain Boomer's health meter), I definitely would have rated this one a bit closer to average. What's also strange is that (SPOILER!) the game ends with lil' Boomer not reunited with his mommy, but some other random woman who takes him away, setting up a sequel which never materialized. Let's all crowd-fund *Baby Boomer 2*! – PC

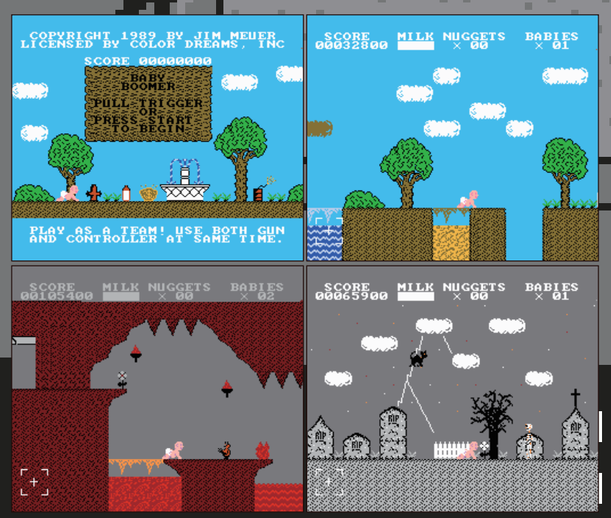
Back to the Future

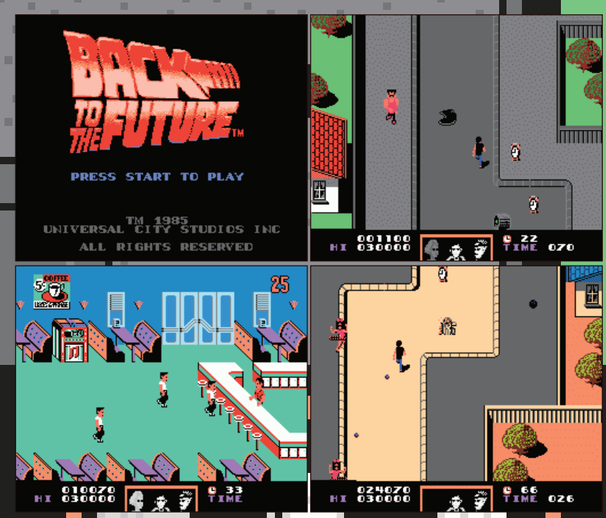
Genre: Action
Release Date: Sept. 1989
Developer: Beam Software
Publisher: LJN
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

This video game adaptation of the smash hit 1985 film is a huge swing and a miss. As Marty McFly in 1955 Hill Valley, you have to venture on a vertically scrolling street and collect clocks while avoiding hula-hooping girls, men moving plate glass, jock bullies, and killer bees. Note: none of this has anything to do with the movie, with the exception of a skateboard power-up which increases the pace of the game but not the fun. A bowling ball can be obtained to take out enemies and make the game a bizarre shooter for a bit. These monotonous, seemingly never-ending sequences are broken up by simple mini-games: a *Tapper*-like sequence at a diner where you have to deliver milkshakes to customers, one in a classroom where you move up and down to collect hearts fired at you, and a game where Marty has to collect music notes with his guitar on stage at the dance. The final sequence has you trying to accelerate the Delorean time machine to 88 mph to get back home to 1985, a difficult task with all the lightning that must be avoided. But odds are that players won't last that long playing this licensed property with unimaginative gameplay, subpar controls, and annoying, looping music.

Reflections: *Back to the Future* remains infamous to many NES and retro gaming fans for a good reason. It was a prime example of a video game company pumping out a below average game they thought would sell a ton of copies just because it had a movie license slapped onto it. Unfortunately, LJN was correct and many a fan of the movie was greeted with a game that was not just bad, but incomprehensible in its movie license connection. – PC

Despite this game's notoriety, I know a number of seemingly smart, "with it" individuals who swear to love this game. Stranger still, I can attest that it isn't for show or irony – they actually enjoy this mess! I think it all comes down to what we played as kids because games were expensive and new titles to call our own were few and far between. I'd wager that, by necessity, all of us secretly grew to love at least one LJN game or something similar. – IF





Back to the Future II & III

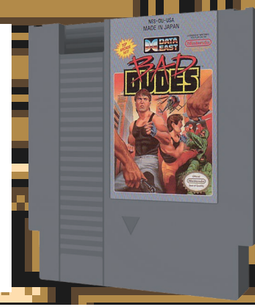
Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Sept. 1990
Developer: Beam Software
Publisher: LJN
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★

As Marty McFly, players must traverse an alternate 1985 Hill Valley brought about by Biff's meddling, and restore the original timeline by finding and destroying his sports almanac – just like in the movie. Unlike the movie, you accomplish this by navigating a series of confusingly similar platforming stages and besting an unnecessarily high number of "puzzle" rooms in order to find the almanac in the first place. You'll need to avoid and shoot rocks at a series of enemies throughout the main stages that bear no resemblance to anything you'd find in the movie. These enemies are legion, and have a tendency to fly right at you quickly as they enter the screen. Floaty controls and poor hit detection do you no favors as you try to find your way to 30 (yes, 30) puzzle rooms that really consist of nothing more than "collect all the random objects before time runs out." If successful, you'll be given an item lost in time (for some reason) to return to a correct time and place. Where is that? To quote the game: "Look for the secret entrances in unlikely places." Then, if you manage to find a secret entrance and happen to have the right item to return there, you'll need to first unscramble a word puzzle to drop it off. This game is essentially a test of patience: How long can you go without turning the console off in frustration? This game is doubly punishing, requiring many hours just to beat the *Back to the Future II* section. Even if you do, you get to immediately play the "sequel" in *Back to the Future III*, which is literally the same gameplay but with a Wild West setting. There are scant few joys in this game, such as being able to travel between 1955, 1985, and 2015 in the DeLorean (after you seek out the remote control and make sure you have enough fuel, of course). And there's an interesting mechanic in the idea of a Marty clone in previously traveled time periods that will kill you if touched. But these can't save the game from its cardinal sin – it's simply not fun. This truly terrible cash-in of a game isn't broken in the basic sense of the word, but it's plain awful.

Reflections: At least *Back to the Future* on the NES is a straightforward action game, flawed though it may be. This is simply a dreadful mess. And on top of that, there are major logic problems with the game itself. Marty gets to travel between 1955, Biff's 1985, and... the normal 2015? By the movie's own logic (which Doc clearly states), traveling to 2015 after Biff changed the timeline would be useless, because it would be Biff's 2015. Even the very simplest aspects of the movie are wrong – Doc is stuck in 1875? Really? They couldn't even proofread the correct year of 1885 from the third movie? – JD

Bad Dudes

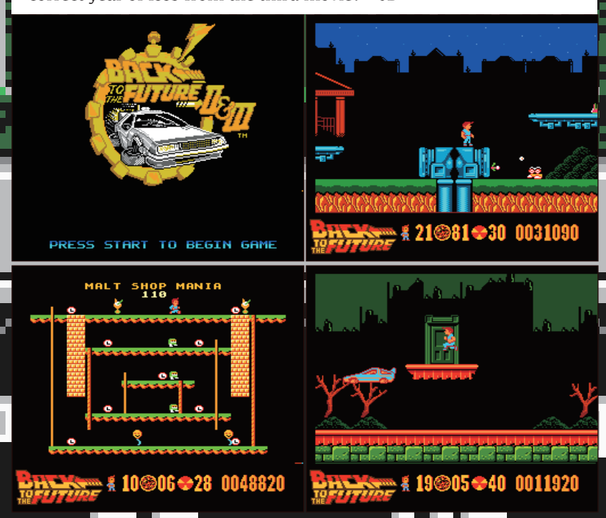
Bad Dudes Vs DragonNinja *(PAL)*
Genre: Beat 'em Up
Release Date: July 1990
Developer: Data East
Publisher: Data East
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★

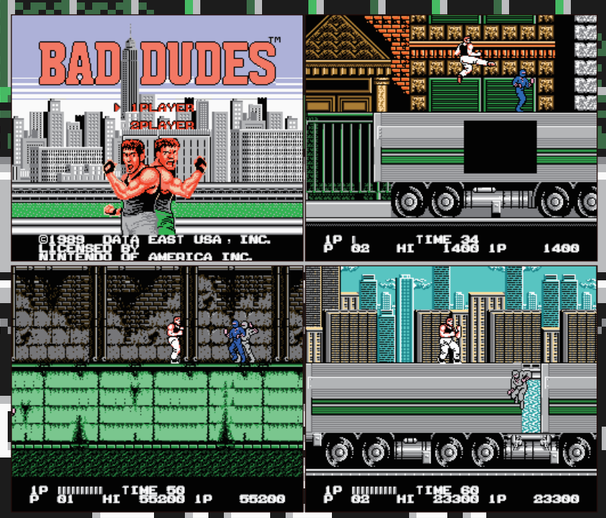


Blade and Striker must rescue the U.S. President from the Dragon Ninja clan in this side-scrolling beat 'em up. Gameplay usually involves fighting on two separate, nonisometric planes that the players can jump up/down from. Ninjas and other baddies attack, and they must be fended off with various punches, kicks, a jump kick, and a spinning jump kick. Nunchucks and knives can be picked up for a more powerful attack, and cans of cola can be grabbed to replenish the health meter. While the plot and setting are full of amusing '80s action movie tropes, the game suffers in a number of ways. The animation is extremely choppy, with the player's character movement being very robotic. Punches/kicks come out a split second too soon or too late, which is unfortunate when enemies move and attack in quick ways that become difficult to avoid without clairvoyance. Enemies are equipped with maces, throwing weapons, and an all-around strong arsenal that is going to require some memorization if players wish to work around these challenges. Despite the on-screen graphical flicker, the settings are at least fairly nice for an early NES title. Sewers, cities, and fights atop trains are all well-visualized. Music has an action movie vibe, but the use of the sound chip causes the instrumentation in each track to get grating rather quickly. In the end, the whole experience devolves into frantic button mashing while struggling to move around. The final nail in the coffin is the absence of a cooperative two-player mode, which the game would have benefited from greatly.

Reflections: I think more people are probably aware of this game's excellent setup and finale than they are with the gameplay itself. Who wouldn't want to go out for a round of burgers with the President after whippin' ninja ass all across the city? – IF

At my semi-local multiplex movie theater, *Bad Dudes* was one of the dozen or so arcade games that were available in the lobby to play. I tended to keep my quarters saved for other games that were less of a headache to me at the time, such as the quirky top-down racer *A.P.B.* or *P.O.W.: Prisoners of War*. – PC



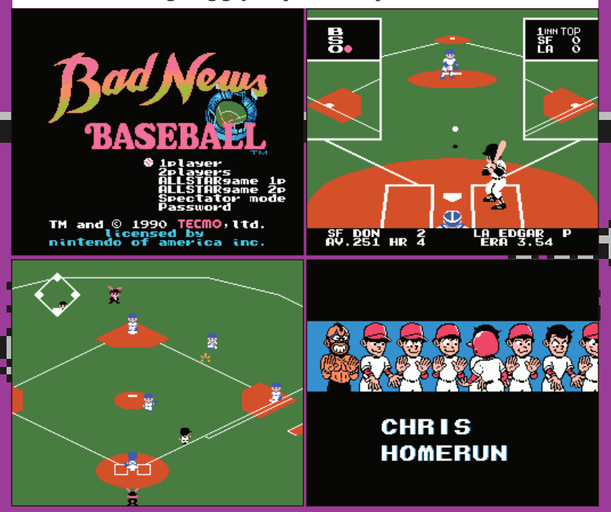


Bad News Baseball

Genre: Sports
Release Date: June 1990
Developer: Tecmo
Publisher: Tecmo
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

This cartoonish, humorous baseball title features 12 selectable teams, each with different team colors and individual player stats for batting, running, throwing, and even fielding ability at different positions. Single games, spectating mode, an all-star game, and a round-robin mode via password are available, where players must defeat all of the other teams. On the field, controls are smooth for batting, pitching, and fielding. While batting, players can easily swing and connect for some nice hits, although home runs seem to occur too easily. There's plenty of ball control while pitching, and in the field the players' arm strength is usually sufficient for decent throws. There's also the ability to jump and dive for the ball. On defense, the only nitpick is not being able to sometimes tell where the outfielder is in relation to an incoming ball, and the lack of the "infield fly rule" is disappointing. Computer players handle themselves quite well, with solid AI that prevents some cheap runs from being scored. The presentation is excellent here, with great colors, nicely defined cartoon players, rabbit umpires (!), and nicely animated cutscenes for home runs and close tag plays at bases. There are also outstanding voice samples calling balls, strikes, and outs. There's even a "girls mode" that switches the players to females via button combinations on both controllers and resetting the game! While lacking some accoutrements seen in other baseball titles of the time, the standard gameplay is an extremely polished, good time on the baseball diamond.

Reflections: I remember this title quite fondly as a child, as my friends and I would play it from time to time (I cannot remember if my neighbor had it, or if we simply rented it more than once). Tecmo really rebounded here after the pretty ho-hum *Tecmo Baseball*, where they seemed to play it too safe and tried to emulate simulations like *Bases Loaded* a bit too closely, instead of showing the ol' Tecmo charm and personality they're known for. So here we get bunny umpires, players who get knocked out literally when called out, and funny little cartoony cutscenes. My favorite has to be the home run celebration where the batter slaps hands with his teammates. At the end of the line, you can quickly spot none other than Rex Beat from *Tecmo World Wrestling*! I guess he's a bench coach when not giving guys suplexes and piledrivers. – PC

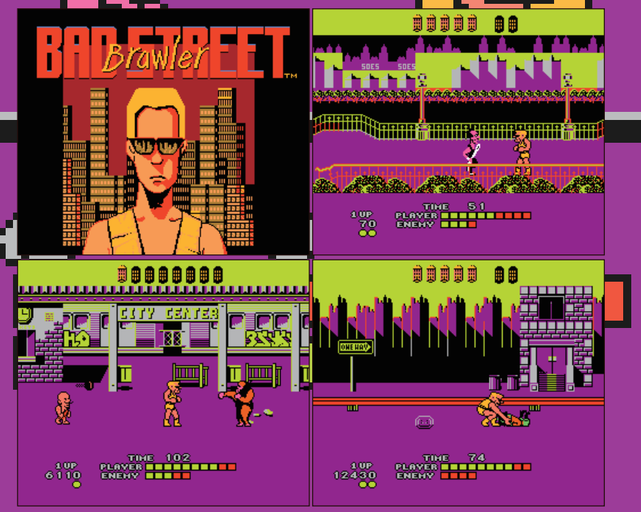


Bad Street Brawler

Genre: Beat 'em Up
Release Date: Sept. 1989
Developer: Beam Software
Publisher: Mattel
Players: 1-2
Special Features: Power Glove (optional)
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★⋆

This simplistic side-scrolling beat 'em up has the player as Duke Davis, brawling with crooks, thugs, and circus renegades (?!). The player moves along a 2D plane and has a few "force moves" per level (punches and kicks). One attack is assigned to each button and A+B per level as well as the ability to jump by pressing up. Some of the assigned attacks are humorous, like the aeroplane spin, ear twist, and the stooge attack. The punching/kicking moves at Duke's disposal change between levels, and are generally tailored to help fend off the enemies faced in each stage, all to prevent the player's health bar from depleting. The game is a boring left-to-right affair with little strategy, and progress can generally be made by avoiding most enemies except for a few that must be defeated to proceed. A short time limit spells out this strategy. The game is garishly colored in hot neons that make little sense, but fighting gorillas, dogs, circus muscle men, and other oddities at least make it humorous for a short while. If you have a Power Glove handy, feel free to try the game with it, but it probably won't help too much.

Reflections: For a long time, this was my go-to game for a laugh. Ugly purples on the landscape, our valiant hero sporting an electric yellow buzzcut and lime green shorts... the game tried so hard to capture an attitude, an idea of what was thought to be cool in the late '80s, and it failed miserably. It's one of only two games, along with *Super Glove Ball*, that was made specifically with the Power Glove controller in mind, but I don't know anyone who owned it for that reason, as I recall it hitting bargain bins relatively quickly. – IF



Balloon Fight

Genre: Action
Release Date: June 1986
Developer: Nintendo R&D1
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⋆

Strap on those balloons and take to the sky to defeat rival balloonists sporting bird beaks. Constantly tapping B will cause the player's man to flap his arms (A does it repeatedly) and rise, while doing nothing will cause him to descend. The objective is to eliminate all the other balloon travelers on screen. Flying just above and into an opponent will pop one of their balloons and either send them plummeting into the water or onto a platform, where they must be kicked from before they can inflate spare balloons to fly again. Players must be careful not to have higher balloon flyers run into them, as their balloons will pop and they'll lose a life. Players must also avoid bouncing lightning strikes as well as a giant man-eating fish who lives in the water on the bottom of the screen. It must be said that the game is nearly an exact copy of the Williams' classic arcade title *Joust*, at least in concept. The standard game can be played cooperatively with two players and there is a third mode called Balloon Trip. This extra game is an example of an endless flyer where the only goal is to keep the Balloon Man alive while scrolling into progressively more complex and dangerous lightning patterns. This mode is incredibly addicting and makes the cart feel like two distinct games in one. Overall, it's a simple concept buoyed by cute character design, nice controls, and some bubbly music. The two-player simultaneous mode adds some balloon spice!

Reflections: The standard mode is fun, but for me the real enjoyment of this game comes from two things: the preposterous premise of men dressed as birds floating around on balloons (that makes *Joust* seem normal), and the insanely addicting and simple Balloon Trip mode. Whenever I fire up this cart it's always under the pretense that I'll play for 10 minutes. Next thing I know, I've killed an hour dodging ball lightning. – IF

Now THIS is how you make a clone of a game – you take the basic concept but twist it and make it your own. It's rare that a game can be so cute and at the same time have people horrifically dying by getting eaten by a giant mutant fish. I always thought that it was interesting that the turbo-flapping via the A button wasn't really as helpful as the single-flapping from the B button. There's something to be said for flapping in moderation, I suppose. – PC

Bandai Golf: Challenge Pebble Beach

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Feb. 1989
Developer: TOSE
Publisher: Bandai
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★⋆

Take to the links of the heralded Pebble Beach course in this snoozer of a golf game. Players select one or two players, the back or normal tee to hit off of, and the handicap. Each of the 18 holes can be viewed both overhead and horizontally, which allows the player to see the course elevation. Wind is present for each hole but the strength and direction are not random but pre-determined. Players select a golf club to use and the direction of the slice/hook of the ball before going into the swing and selecting the power on the meter with the A button. The player can then decide where vertically on the ball it will be struck via the meter (purple for ball's bottom, red for the top). This will determine the height the ball is hit. While very technical in establishing how to hit the ball, the game's giant flaw is failing to assist the player in choosing which club to use, as neither the game nor the manual provides a simple guide for the yardage per club option. Likewise, the game does not truly tell you how far any obstacles/greens are on the course, so choosing which club to use and the power required is mostly a crapshoot, resulting in a strangely incomplete and somewhat unplayable golf game. The droning, short looping music only makes shutting the game off that much of an easier choice.

Reflections: I know golf is not the most exciting spectacle, but *Bandai Golf: Challenge Pebble Beach* isn't helping the cause with their game adaptation of the sport by any means. I almost fell asleep twice playing the game for this book review, and once more while attempting to write it. I mean, sure, the mechanic of being able to choose where to hit the ball is semi-interesting, since in most golf games the player has to time the swing for where the ball is hit: either head on, slicing, or hooking. It's a detail like that which makes me zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz – PC

Bandit Kings of Ancient China

Genre: Strategy
Release Date: Dec. 1990
Developer: Koei
Publisher: Koei
Players: 1-5
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★

Choose from several champions in a quest to defeat the evil Gao Qiu in this text-heavy, turn-based strategy game. There are four scenarios which coincide along the timeline (the game begins in 1101 and ends Jan. 1127), with the goal to take over as much of Gao Qiu's provinces as possible and defeat him. Champion selection reflects the style in how they fight, affects leadership skill, and even starting map placement. The map screen is the main port of call, listing the provinces and who owns them via flag indicators. Information about play is listed in a ticker bar at the foot of the screen which pushes the story on and gives the player options. Each province has one turn a month which can be used to recruit men for the army, rest, negotiate with other factions, and settle unoccupied land. As the game progresses, the player can recruit heroes who act as leaders of troops, each bringing their own unique stats with them, which is very useful in battles. Once settled in a province, a whole new set of options is available, from hunting to building. Every improvement to a province raises loyalty, which in turn increases taxes which can then be used on improving the army. The occasional epidemic, civil unrest, or even army desertion during the start of a new season can provide a whole new set of challenges if the players' provinces are affected. Battles take place on hexagonal grid tiles with the added stress that the war must be won in 30 days else it is lost. Various terrain types add bonus defense and attack statuses, the idea being to position troops effectively in order to win. Magic, swords, bows, and the added feature of taking prisoners (who can be recruited or even executed) make for interesting battles, but sadly there are no animations, just numbers that change. What little imagery that exists is a nice addition, but the game is severely lacking in anything graphical. The music, however, is very welcome; its seasonal changes are fresh and toe-tapping. An intriguing but initially difficult to access game awaits if patience is your virtue. If so, there is definitely something here and also a five player mode if an epic battle over China is your bag!

Reflections: Graphics aren't everything to a game, but there needs to be something more than not even glossy looking spreadsheets. What the game has in ideas to be something really special, it lacks in bringing in a broader appeal. Even some limp rudimentary animations would be welcome here, like in *Defender of the Crown*, which is a simple, bastardized version of this game with slapped on graphics. The addition of a five-player game mode (who in their right mind would have four like-minded friends coming over to play this?) shows the popularity there was and still is for Koei games. I can only imagine the absolute carnage and backstabbery that would ensue during a 50-hour weekend slog. – JE

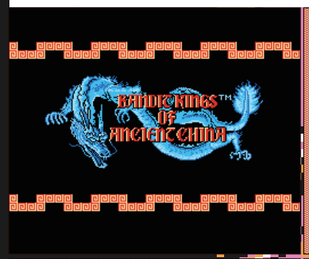
Barbie

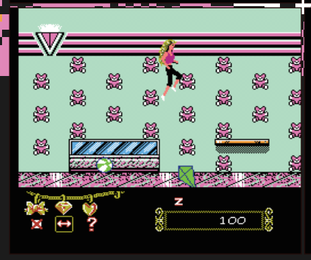
Genre: Platformer
Release Date: Dec. 1991
Developer: Imagineering
Publisher: Hi Tech Expressions
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

In this platformer, Barbie dreams of going to the Fantasy Ball with Ken and must retrieve accessories in worlds such as a shopping mall, diner, and an underwater kingdom. Gameplay consists of fairly slow platforming where Barbie has to avoid strange, harmful objects such as moving hats, water fountains, and tennis rackets hitting balls. If Barbie is hit, she will lose "Z's" and wake up if all disappear (losing a life). Barbie is armed with three different charms which can be selected and thrown at enemies to defeat them. Charms are also used to enlist the help of animal friends (bird, cat, seahorse, etc.) who will assist the player in defeating some enemies and also in solving simple puzzles to help advance to the next area of the level. Presentation is above average, with nice character sprites for Barbie and her friends. However, each level has a very limited color palette. Mostly harmless, the platforming action should be adequate/challenging for smaller children and maybe fans of Barbie, but not for anyone else.

Reflections: I'm not a Barbie basher by any means, but I would think that a game involving Barbie could aim a little higher than having young girls try to capture high heels in order to win over a boy. Then again, I'm not exactly the primary target audience, am I?

My sister to this day complains she never had a Ken doll. For some strange reason, my father bought her a *Welcome Back Kotter* Mr. Kotter doll as a substitute. I'm as big a Gabe Kaplan fan as the next guy, but come on, Dad. That would be like buying me a Smurf figurine to double as Cobra Commander when playing with my G.I. Joes. – PC





The Bard's Tale: Tales of the Unknown

Genre: RPG
Release Date: Nov. 1991
Developer: Interplay Productions
Ported by: Atelier Double
Publisher: FCI
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★

Originally released in 1985 on PCs, this is an RPG set in the "dungeon-crawler" mold. You'll start in an adventurer's guild to create a set of up to six characters that will make up your party, drawing from a typical assortment of fantasy role-playing classes such as warrior, wizard, and bard, for example. Once character creation is complete, you'll set out to bring order to chaos and defeat roving bands of enemies led by the evil Mangar. The world can be explored via a first-person perspective that sets you in one of the four cardinal directions and includes an overhead map in the corner of the screen. Enemies are encountered randomly and take you to a separate battle screen. Battles are turn-based and use a menu system where you'll have a set of choices based on the class of each of your characters. "Attack" is a basic option available to those in the front of the party, which will use the weapon in that character's hand. "Cast" utilizes magic spells you have learned, with surprisingly varied effects including direct damage, stat buffs, and even summoning spells (there are also noncombat spells you can use out of battle, such as "scry site," which acts like a compass). Perhaps most interesting is the "sing" command, which is available to bards. By filling up on root beer in the tavern – or using cough drops – bards can sing a song that creates various effects, such as teleporting the party back to the adventurer's guild or charming a foe. Enemy parties are comprised of up to three groups of one to nine foes (which can be a bit confusing). However, each group lets only one enemy attack. You can select three to five of your own characters to stand in the front row – the only party members that can directly attack and take hits. While there are some story elements thrown in the game, they don't resemble anything that could be called a plot, and the only real motivation to play is to beat up bad guys. Interaction with other characters is minimal, and puzzles are very simple when they do exist. The user interface is tedious, and the menu system is not very intuitive. There are some interesting elements, such as the variety in spells and classes, but other games on the NES are more worthy of your role-playing time.

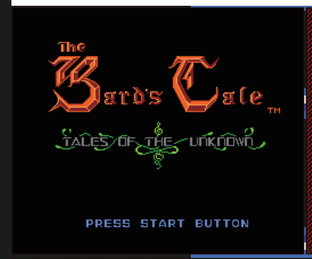
Reflections: *Bard's Tale* is heavily influenced by the granddaddy of tabletop RPGs, *Dungeons and Dragons*, frequently to the former's detriment. Some elements that seem great when rolling dice around fall flat here, such as the random stat rolling for character creation. You may be honest in front of friends, but when alone with an NES, there's nothing to prevent cancelling out an unfavorable stat roll and trying again. The paper-thin story is a mighty disservice to a genre that finds its strength in crafting intriguing worlds by interweaving puzzles and plot threads with player interaction. This works more as an education on the early history of the RPG genre than as a truly fun game, as even kids in the early '90s would have found *Bard's Tale* tedious in its limited NES form. I know I did. – JD

Barker Bill's Trick Shooting

Genre: Shooting Gallery
Release Date: Aug. 1990
Developer: Nintendo R&D1
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1
Special Features: Zapper (required)
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★½

Barker Bill and his assistant Trixie are your hosts in this light gun shooter game consisting of four mini-games. Balloon Saloon involves the player shooting balloons that float to the top of the screen. The dog from *Duck Hunt* cameos. Flying Saucers has the player shoot at dishes that are tossed into the air by Bill and Trixie, with a parrot who will occasionally try to steal a dish. Window Pains is a simpler game where the player will have to shoot objects that are dropped in front of rows of windows without shooting glass panes. Finally, Fun Follies is a mode that combines the previous three along with two additional games: Trixie's Shot, where the player has to shoot coins she carries across the screen, and Bill's Thrills, where tossed objects must be shot before they fall on Trixie. These are all simple shooting games, but they are done well enough with nice graphics/presentation. They also have a bit of humor thrown in, and should hold a gamer's attention at least for a little while.

Reflections: I'm not familiar with anyone who owned this game as a child. The NES Zapper collected dust for the most part, after the initial 10 minutes or so a person would use it to play *Duck Hunt* after they first got their console. That said, *Barker Bill's Trick Shooting* isn't too bad, and I enjoy the stage show theme. Trixie is, ummm, bustier than I would expect in what I thought was a family-themed game, though. I guess we now know why ol' Bill hired her. – PC



Base Wars

Genre: Sports, Fighting
Release Date: June 1991
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Ultra Games
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Battery Save, Edit Mode
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

This futuristic baseball game features robot players who fight out their disputes over plays on the field. The rules are almost identical to baseball with nine innings, three strikes per at bat, and three outs per inning. The major difference here is that on close force-out plays at bases or tag plays, the game switches to a one-on-one fight between the fielder and base-runner, and the winner determines the call of the runner being "safe" or "out." This mode is fast and frantic, with the two robots going at it with melee and projectile attacks until one's hit points are depleted. Each team member is one of four different robot classes with different speed, health, and combat styles. The cycles are fast but have low hit points and maneuverability. Cyborgs are the all-around class and seem to have a slight combat advantage. Tanks are super slow but strong and make excellent hitters. Lastly, flybots, which are legless saucers, make fantastic pitchers. This variety is nice and not entirely expected. When playing in a pennant race, you may spend money between games to get weapon upgrades and stat boosts for your robots. This can easily create some killer players. While definitely a fun concept, the actual gameplay doesn't feel as well-tuned as it could be, especially the fighting, which is overly basic and heavily affects outcomes of games. Skill at baseball is secondary to combat, but the game is still enjoyable, especially against human opponents, and the graphics and sounds are lively, with nice voice samples.

Reflections: I may not love this mash-up as much as I once did, but this was a fun break from the usual sports games at my neighbor's house. I happened to be better at mashing attacks than he was and I would often win the game despite being worse at the actual baseball portion of the game. – IF

Baseball

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Oct. 1985
Developer: Nintendo R&D1
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★

The earliest NES baseball game is also the most basic one. Select one of six teams, whose only difference is the uniform color, and then swing away! This baseball game allows you to do what you'd expect in a baseball game: bat, bunt, steal, hit and run, throw fastballs/curveballs, etc. What the game doesn't allow you to do though is actually field the ball on defense. When the ball is hit, the closest fielder will automatically waddle towards the ball, and your control only comes into play once the fielder has it in order to select the base to throw or run to. This is a big disappointment, as you really don't have as much control as you should for a baseball game. This title also lacks any real player differences, as your first hitter will bat and run exactly the same as the fifth or ninth. If you want a simple and nostalgic baseball experience, this is it. If you want to better simulate baseball, try one of the other dozen or more baseball titles on the system. Notable for being an NES launch title, but not for much else.

Reflections: Unlike *10-Yard Fight*, with *Baseball* you inexplicably cannot fully play on both sides of the ball. This is a cute game, and I know many have fond memories of it since it's probably the first NES sports game many owned, but the fact of the matter is that it's just not that good. I always got a kick out of the instruction manual, which states that occasionally one of your fielders may disappear from the field temporarily. This happened to me one time when my left fielder vanished as he was running for a ball at the outfield wall. This allowed the batter to easily waltz around the bases for an inside-the-park home run. It was very amusing to behold. – PC

Baseball Simulator 1.000

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Mar. 1990
Developer: Culture Brain
Publisher: Culture Brain
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Battery Save, Edit Mode
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

This baseball game is packed with plenty of features, including a full season mode of up to 165 games (including stat tracking), 18 selectable teams, and an impressive edit mode that allows you to change player names and even create your own team/players. There are even six different baseball parks to play in, including one in a harbor and one in space (!). What really stands out here though is the "Ultra League," six teams whose players have limited super abilities during games for pitching, fielding, and batting. For example, one of the pitching powers makes the ball stop in mid-air and then go again, and one of the batting abilities turns the ball into a veritable rocket when hit, making a line drive that's impossible to field until it hits the outfield wall. While these Ultra abilities are nice, they come across more as a fleeting, fun gimmick to cover up the baseball in-game play. While the pitching/batting scenario is very nice, the play in the field both looks and feels overly simplistic and lacks true depth for a serious "simulator" baseball feel. There are also glaring shortcomings that bring the experience down, including pitchers that tend to tire far too quickly, and the simulation of computer vs. computer season games, which take several minutes to sit through. It's a solid foundation, but lacking somewhat.

Reflections: In case you were wondering, the "1.000" in the title stands for a perfect batting average: literally one hit per every at-bat. The simulation of computer games during season mode is an absolute killer. In *Baseball Stars*, they are simulated almost instantly, making it easy for a player to get through them to move on to their own games. In *Baseball Simulator 1.000* though, the experience is tantamount to a mini root canal. I'm not sure what the process was for simulating the games here and maybe it was more accurate for statistics generation, etc., but I'd rather have a quick, rough probability estimate at a game's result versus this tedium. The Ultra abilities always bothered me a bit. Maybe since it's the most literal performance enhancer you can have on the field, and I'm more a lover of the purity of the game? I would imagine modern PED (performance enhancing drug) testing being the death of the Ultra League... – PC

Baseball Stars

Genre: Sports
Release Date: July 1989
Developer: SNK
Publisher: SNK
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Battery Save, Edit Mode
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★★

Many features, modes, and excellent baseball play await in this well-polished title from SNK. Visually, the game shines, as characters/graphics are all colorful, detailed, and well animated. On the field, there's a great amount of control over the pitching, with the player being able to throw fastballs, curveballs, slowballs, and even sinkers. On the base path, players have the ability to advance, retreat to bases, and even stop to wait and see if a ball will be caught in the air – a rarity for a baseball title at the time. When fielding, players can easily track fly balls via shadow on the field, dive for balls, jump in the air, or even climb the outfield wall to attempt to rob a potential home run. Each individual player has skill attributes in several different categories, from running to batting to throwing. The amount of modes in the game is deep: exhibition mode, a six team regular-season mode with stat tracking (up to 125 games), team and player creation/edit mode, signing and upgrading players via cash won during season play, firing players, and trading players between created teams. Players can even edit created team names, player names, and select the created team's uniform color. This amount of detail and options were unprecedented for the time, all possible due to the battery backup (the first for an NES sports game). Even the stock teams are all themed and fun, including a team of famous monsters, one with legendary MLB players, and an all women's team. Cheerful music and fun presentation round out a revolutionary console baseball game.

Reflections: *Baseball Stars* was a huge step up from the console baseball titles that came before it. Imagine being able to create your own players and teams when it was an entirely new concept. MIND BLOWN. The amount of time I played this game was serious. Half the fun was simply filled by editing and creating the players and teams, and then trying to slowly build the team and struggling until the players could be upgraded to something respectable. The season mode was fantastic, although it's a nit-pick that more than six teams could not be used in it (I know, I'm ungrateful). At least simulating the CPU vs. CPU games took literally a second, versus the lifetime it would take in *Baseball Simulator 1.000*. The battery backup was both a blessing and a curse, as you had to make sure to hold reset before pressing power on the NES, as you could risk wiping the battery on the cart by doing a "hard" power off. The game would warn you outright to do this, but I remember a few times where my season and all my created players/teams were eliminated. Mild crying ensued. – PC

Baseball Stars II

Genre: Sports
Release Date: July 1992
Developer: SNK
Publisher: Romstar
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★⋆

This sequel to the fun-filled, feature-laden original keeps most of the experience the same. The very well-polished graphics and presentation return almost untouched. In the field, the great gameplay remains largely the same, with the pinpoint control when pitching and fielding with diving and jumping. Additionally, on defense, players have the ability to shift their outfielders left, right, or play shallow or deep. On offense, the batting and baserunning controls are mostly the same. Players are now viewable when taking a lead on the bases themselves, which is nice. However, the new ability to "quick bunt" by hitting A + DOWN may result in more accidental bunts than you would like. There have been positive tweaks though: striking out CPU players seems to be a little bit easier, and the foul ball calling seems more consistent. The plethora of modes in the game returns: exhibition games, a six-team regular-season mode with stat tracking (up to 125 games), team creation mode, signing and upgrading players on created teams via cash won during season play, firing players, and trading players between created teams. However, some inexplicable omissions from the original game, like the ability to customize created player and team names, are disappointing, as is the decision to have "realistic" player and team names instead of the more thematically bizarre/charming ones in the original title. For every improvement, such as optional errors or four different stadiums to play in, there seems to be something removed, like women players. It's still an excellent baseball title, but not quite the masterpiece the original was, and lacking the original's spunk.

Reflections: I'm not sure how many people would be disappointed by a game of this pedigree and caliber, but I sure am. Removing the custom team and player names is an inexplicable change. Did they not want kids to be able to name their players after their friends and pet cat? Sorry, but that was a draw to me. And tempering the faces of the players to be normal (some wear sunglasses or have wild faces/hair in the original) just drains the fun factor. There are 15 other NES baseball games that take the sport seriously, so I'm not sure why it was decided this title should as well, especially since the original took liberties. Is that why there are no women players either? Strange decisions abound. If this title had simply added some new features, and perhaps a more robust season mode, while keeping every feature of the original, it would probably still be regarded today as one of the best baseball video games ever created. Instead, what is still a great title isn't mentioned as much as the superior original instead. – PC

Bases Loaded

Genre: Sports
Release Date: July 1988
Developer: TOSE
Publisher: Jaleco
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★

This is a decent baseball title with a unique viewpoint that turned into a major series for publisher Jaleco. The game has two basic modes: Pennant is a one-player season with progress thankfully tracked by password save, while Versus is a one-on-one game against a real-life friend! The 12 teams are fictional but do have real strengths and weaknesses for each player, reflected in their stats, which affect things like pitching and hitting. When batting, the game is viewed from behind the pitcher, not the batter, which is stylistically cool, but in practice it tends to make batting much trickier than in a typical baseball game. Players have to track where the pitch will end up (watching the catcher's mitt can help) and then control the swing both laterally and vertically. Pitching offers the full set of options expected from a baseball title of this era, allowing for change-ups, fastballs, and curves. Once the ball is in play, the viewpoint changes to a more traditional overhead view of the field. Fielding is passable but sluggish, and tracking the ball can sometimes be a mess. This a decent option among the early baseball crop, and the season mode is nice, but better baseball titles were still to come.

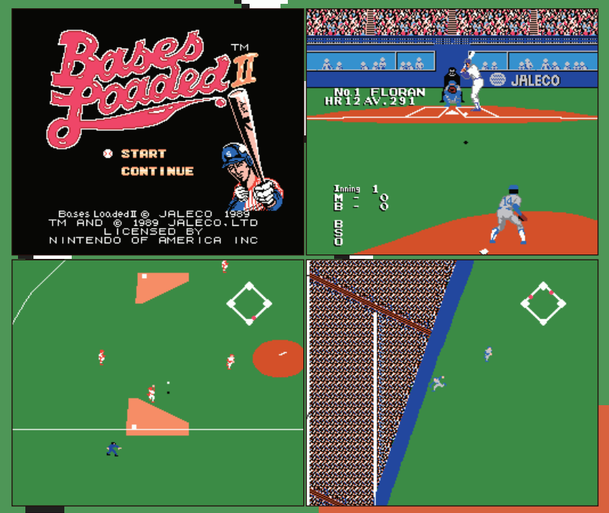
Reflections: This game took some risks for a baseball title, and it has that Jaleco charm, but I think anyone's enjoyment of this title is going to really come down to how well they adjust to the flipped viewpoint. Graphically the game has some nice touches, certainly the pitcher animations, but it almost feels like they got hung up on that and designed the rest of the title around this sweet pitching model they developed. This was a favorite among the budding jocks in elementary school, and I'm sure it provided fond memories, but for the time period I'd take *R.B.I. Baseball* if given the choice. – IF

Bases Loaded II: Second Season

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Jan. 1990
Developer: TOSE
Publisher: Jaleco
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★

The second entry in this baseball series makes both positive and detrimental changes. The original 12 teams are back with new players and stats (with strengths/weaknesses for players), and the full season Pennant mode returns via password as well as the single two-player game. The behind-the-pitcher perspective for batting/pitching makes a return, looking as nice as ever, and batting is the same (controlling the swing laterally and vertically), but this time it's much smoother and less frustrating. Like the previous game, once a ball is hit, the perspective changes to an overhead view for baserunning and fielding. However, the odd choice to mess with the traditional fielding perspective, by rotating it 90 degrees, is unwelcome and disorienting. Gameplay is snappier and the fielders are more energetic, but determining where one needs to be to catch the ball is still just as difficult. The overall game has a nice coat of graphical polish, but the actual gameplay changes leave this no better overall than the original title, just different.

Reflections: This series constantly seems to be trying to fix what isn't broken to heavily mixed results. The more forgiving hitbox now lets the unusual batting screen work, but the fielding changes actually makes one of the weaker areas of the first game even worse. Possibly more common than the first entry in the series, I must have owned at least 15 copies of this when buying up boxes of NES games from my classmates in high school. They were just as hard to flip in '99 as they are today. – IF

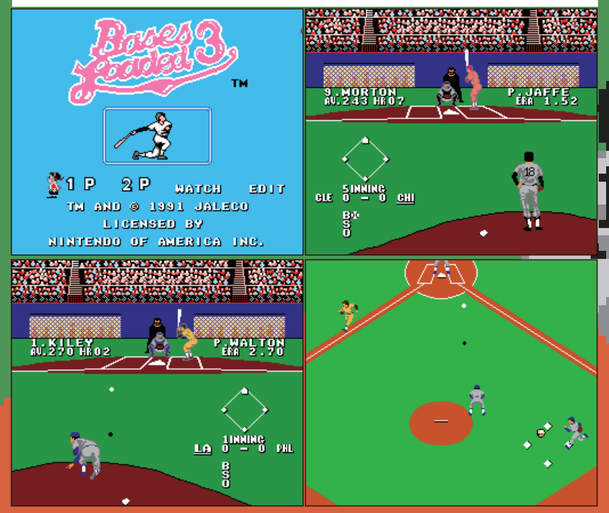


Bases Loaded 3 (Ryne Sandberg Plays)

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Sept. 1991
Developer: TOSE
Publisher: Jaleco
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Edit Mode
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★⋆

The goal in this baseball title is to "play the perfect game." Players may select from one of 12 fictional teams (with player stats/skills for batting and pitching) or a customizable team and use it to play. After selecting the first opponent and one of three stadiums, the game begins. The pitching and batting view takes place from behind the pitcher. When batting, players can move laterally but will have to time the pitch and swing the bat either down, up, or level. Choosing the correct height of the swing will result in a more solid hit. When pitching, players can choose the general pitch location, and once the pitcher is winding up, will have to awkwardly select speed (by holding up for a certain amount of time) and the level of accuracy (by tapping the A button). While not great, this is passable. Problems begin in the field's perspective – a strange and unnecessary center field perspective. When defending, it is very difficult to tell where your outfielders are in relation to the ball. In the infield, it's somewhat the same problem, with the extra issue of having your first baseman glued to first base sometimes as the ball flies past. The computer opponent fares much better, often being somehow in perfect outfield position of balls hit very quickly, but inexplicably at times letting balls sail right by. Hitting a ball out of the infield on the ground is very difficult due to the undersized infield and extreme quickness of the players (shortstops sometimes make plays second basemen usually would), and they have veritable cannons for arms. These issues wouldn't be nearly as big if the object of the game wasn't to play "perfectly." Players are deducted points for things such as getting caught stealing, throwing to the wrong base, letting up three runs in an inning, and even striking out. The better/worse the score, the higher caliber opponent the player will face next (from one to five). If players can somehow play a perfect game against a level five opponent, they win the game. Most won't want to bother.

Reflections: Whose bright idea was it to have a "perfect game" objective in lieu of a season?! Seriously, no striking out?! That's like having a basketball game where you can't get a "perfect game" if you miss a three point shot. I had this game on the SNES, in the form of *Super Bases Loaded* (Ryne Sandberg also "plays" that one). Like many, I was shocked to learn that there was no season or even playoffs mode, in exchange for the somewhat silly "perfect game" objective. However, that version of the game wasn't nearly as miserable, due to the fact that fielders weren't nearly as fast or had rifle arms, and there was helpful radar to help you know where the outfielder was when fielding a fly ball. And check out the groovy Mode 7 graphics, dude! I mastered the game fairly quickly, then got *Ken Griffey Jr. Baseball* (again, like many), and never played it again. It probably ended up at a Funcoland and in another disappointed gamer's collection. – PC

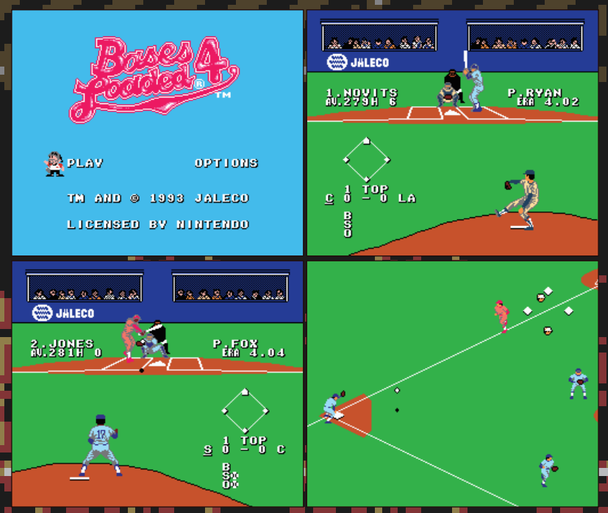


Bases Loaded 4

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Apr. 1993
Developer: TOSE
Publisher: Jaleco
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Rare
★★⯪

The final baseball game in the series on the NES features single exhibition game mode or a 130 game season mode, with the player advancing to the Super Series if they win 70 games. 12 teams are available, with pitchers having individual stats and related skills and batters having offensive ones. Gameplay on the field is very similar to the third installment, with some tweaks. Pitching/batting takes place from behind the pitcher. When pitching, players select the desired location, then the type of pitch, and then can tap the A button to improve precision. It feels nice to control and very satisfying striking batters out. When batting, players can move left/right and up/back in the batter's box, and then can swing level, up, or down. Batting takes some getting used to due to the pitch speed, even if watching the catcher's glove to help judge pitch position. In the field, the perspective is again from center field, which takes time to get a feel for, but a radar screen letting you know where the fielders are is extremely helpful in getting to outfield balls. Like before, fielders can dive and jump for balls. Defensive play is also more realistic, as the strength of throws and the speed of fielders has been toned down some. An interesting addition here is a star system during the game. Good and bad plays by individual players will increase/decrease their attributes for pitching/batting, designated by white stars (positive) and black stars (negative). This can key you in on who is playing well and who you may want to replace if their star rating for the game falls. While not a spectacular experience, it isn't terrible, and the game's different perspective is at least interesting, if not awkward for some players.

Reflections: It's nice to see that the franchise here at least rebounded a little bit… it's just too bad nobody noticed, since not many of these were produced and sold. The cover art for the game is strange: it's a diamond cut from what looks to be the umpire's perspective of an incoming pitch. Now that's what the NES library is lacking – *Umpire Simulator 1.000*! Call balls and strikes, bump chests with angry managers, and clean dirty home plates with your handy brush! Coming Spring 1990 from Vic Tokai! – PC



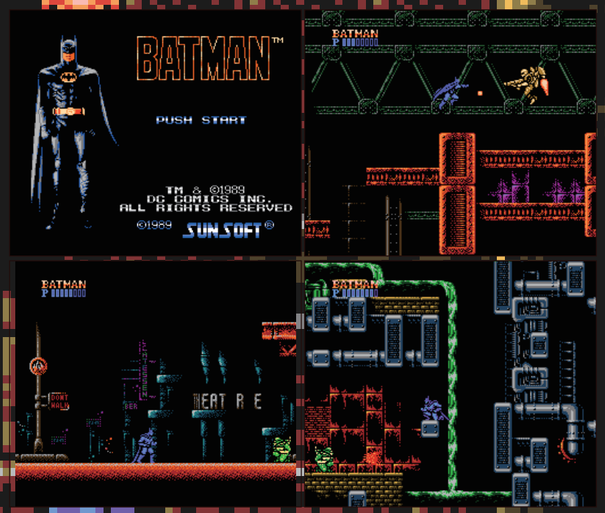
Batman

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Feb. 1990
Developer: Sunsoft
Publisher: Sunsoft
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★★

Coming on the heels of the blockbuster Tim Burton *Batman* film, this action-platformer stands out as a rare example of an entertaining movie-licensed game. The player has access to a basic punch attack as well as three ammo reliant sub-weapons: a gun that fires a slow rocket, a razor disc that splits into a three-way spread shot, and the Batarang. In addition to this arsenal, Batman can wall jump to reach higher areas and find shortcuts. The controls for jumping, bouncing, and maneuvering around increasingly complex stages feel great. The level design is very well done and will test one's precision through sewers, city streets, and warehouses, while the music soundtrack is among the best on the system. The graphics are dark and moody and set the proper tone, although the purple used to make Batman visible is a bit funny. Pick-ups include health to restore the life meter, ammo for weapons, and bonus points for those interested in besting their score. Difficulty does ramp up quickly, however, and it will take most players quite a bit of practice to proceed to the later stages. The only problem with the game is that it doesn't have much to do with Batman at all outside of a few simple cutscenes. The upside to this is the allowance of more creative and excellent enemy designs for our vigilante to put down. It's a fantastic, well-produced licensed platformer that is easy to recommend.

Reflections: *Batman* is a great game, but it always felt like it was meant to be something completely different and Batman was slapped on at the last minute when the opportunity arose. I don't remember flying mecha and green wolverines among the Caped Crusader's mightiest foes. --IF

I know that they couldn't make Batman's outfit black since it would blend in with the background, but the fact that Batman and the Joker share the same fashion sense bothers me. – PC



Batman Returns

Genre: Beat 'em Up, Action
Release Date: Jan. 1993
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Konami
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

In this side-scrolling beat 'em up based on the 1992 film, the player controls Batman and must beat down the clown thugs terrorizing Gotham City. There is a decent variety of attacks Batman employs: punching combination, jump kick, sliding kick, the use of weapons like the Batarang (with limited ammo), and a grappling hook to get at enemies and objects above. There is even a rudimentary blocking move (B + DOWN), and a special spinning move via A + B that will remove a small amount of the player's health bar with each use. Controls, graphics, sound, and music are all solid. However, the gameplay drags after a while, especially since Batman can only face two enemies at a time, and they are always the same enemy type. Fortunately, a couple of nice side-scrolling vehicle levels are thrown in to help break up the monotony a bit, where players have to shoot at enemies in the Batmobile and Batskiboat. Some nice graphics and smooth controls go a decent way, but it seems in this case that hardware limitations may have held back the potential greater offerings of the game.

Reflections: This title came out during that time in the early '90s when many games were being simultaneously released for both the NES and SNES. Of course, the SNES version would be the superior version, and the NES version would be produced in limited quantities since the NES was being slowly phased out. This game in particular had some good things going for it, but I just didn't seem to have fun playing it. The movie it's based on is very strange, if you haven't seen it. Picture a weird Tim Burton film starring Danny Devito and Christopher Walken where Batman happens to show up a few times, and that's pretty much *Batman Returns*. Oh, and there's penguin commandos. – PC

Batman: Return of the Joker

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Dec. 1991
Developer: Sunsoft
Publisher: Sunsoft
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

This odd Batman adventure has players guiding our hero through side-scrolling, platforming levels while taking out enemies with a highly upgradable wrist cannon. Sprites are big and colorful, and the music is the same top notch stuff expected from this developer. The weapon and star of the game is the arm cannon, which starts with a single shot but can be upgraded to wave shots, homing missiles, sprays of stars, and slow-moving but powerful shots that explode on impact, causing splash damage. As cool as all of this variety is, the problem lies in a lack of balance with the weapon upgrades. The slow, powerful shots are basically useless in a game with very frantic action, making upgrading one's weapon a sometimes very bad decision in tight situations. With the frequency that these power-ups are dished out, it's tough to avoid the ones a player doesn't want so they can keep their effective, powered up weapon of choice. Controls sadly feel a bit stiff and the game is merciless, almost immediately, which definitely could have been more manageable with a nimbler hero. Enemies also have a tendency to pop out directly in front of the player as they move forward, and many traps are completely undetectable until they are sprung. Levels are nicely detailed, from jungles to airships, and graphical effects such as lighting strikes are impressive on the NES. Unfortunately, when all is said and done, this is a perfectly presented game that could have been a whole lot more fun to play if the time had been taken to balance the difficulty.

Reflections: I miss the wall jumps and the darker atmosphere of the first Batman game by Sunsoft, but this is still a fun title all on its own. Better maneuverability would have shot this up an extra half point, and less haphazard enemy placement wouldn't have hurt. – IF

Battle Chess

Genre: Board Game, Strategy
Release Date: July 1990
Developer: Interplay Productions
Ported by: Beam Software
Publisher: Data East
Players: 1–2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★⯪

This is the traditional chess board game with kings, queens, rooks, bishops, knights, and pawns, with the goal to "checkmate" the opponent's king (trapping him so he cannot escape without being attacked by an opponent's piece). This version has an action twist. The pieces on the board are all drawn and animated characters who move and battle each other in a predetermined cutscene when a piece is taken. Some of the battle animations are fun, some are amusing, and some are even intense and violent, with stabbings and dismemberment. There is only one animation per battle/winner combination, however, so after a while the games can get tedious with constantly viewing the same animations over and over again. There are standard chess options available, like the ability to take a move back, and a handful of different CPU skill levels to choose from. Thankfully, there is also an option to change to a traditional 2D chess board without the animations to make the game quicker. What you cannot speed up, however, is the protracted time it takes for the CPU to choose a move, even when playing at a lower level. It's amusing, but if you're looking for even a semi-deep chess experience, this isn't the game.

Reflections: I was a chess fan as a kid, and was excited to learn this game existed. I had it on my PC via 3.5-inch floppy disk that may or may not have been pirated (don't copy that floppy!). The thing is, chess is not supposed to be an action-packed spectacle, so after the initial, "Wow, the Thing-looking rook just crushed the knight's head!" shock wears off, you quickly learn that in order to play chess well, you have to experience it properly in all its slow-moving, boring glory. – PC

The Battle of Olympus

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: Dec. 1989
Developer: Infinity
Publisher: Brøderbund Software
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

Orpheus must rescue his girlfriend Helene from Hades in this side-scrolling adventure with light RPG elements. Loosely based on Greek mythology, players must travel between various Greek cities and do battle with monsters from lore as they attempt to confer with the gods and get various weapons and items needed to progress. Orpheus starts with a club and a shield in a village with very little information. By speaking with various townsfolk, players will be able to narrow down the next areas to explore and learn what items, gods, and magic they should locate, from spells that will increase their ability to leap into tree tops, staffs of fire, and increasingly stronger melee weapons. Finding the proper routes to the next area is half the fun, as generally the exploration is a bit less tedious by the game making it obvious when you've reached an area where you need a particular skill to progress. Enemies from Greek mythology, as well as more traditional RPG fare, help bring the world together, ranging from Satyrs and slimes, blue goblins and raging bulls, to iconic boss creatures like Cyclops, Hydras, and Lamias. Exploring the interconnected 2D planes that make up the landscape is a blast, and the overall feel of the game, from graphics to sound, is superb. The ancient Greek aesthetic is nailed perfectly in so many spots. Even if they aren't always depicted accurately, it's fun to see all of the major mythological cameos, adding to the great overall setting of this video game quest. Combat is simple but functional. Armor and weapon upgrades are always fun to check out, and deciphering the puzzles and finishing one's quest is simply something players should want to do, with the fun factor of the game adding a nice underlying momentum.

Reflections: There aren't many games that make up the weird and short-lived genre that *Battle of Olympus* inhabits, but it still stands out as one of the best. It lacks much of the frustration of *Castlevania II: Simon's Quest* while also avoiding the difficulty spikes and odd leveling of *Zelda II: The Adventure of Link*. – IF

Battle Tank (Garry Kitchen's)

Genre: Shooter, Simulation
Release Date: Sept. 1990
Developer: Imagineering
Publisher: Absolute Entertainment
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

In this first-person simulation shooter, the player takes control of an M1 tank and must complete set objectives on each of 10 stages, but every mission amounts to destroying stuff such as fuel tanks and power plants. Tanks and helicopters are the main enemy types, and the player can alter the aim of the M1's turret with the D-pad in order to adjust for distance and height when firing the .50 caliber machine guns, 150 mm cannon, wire-guided shell, and defensive smoke screen. When holding the accelerate button, the tank is moved with UP and DOWN, which becomes frantically frustrating because the weapons are controlled using almost the same method, so practice is required to perform the most basic of functions. The M1 can only sustain a few hits before garnering a game over, and dodging enemy fire is difficult, not to mention avoiding the landmines strewn across each battlefield and managing the ever-ticking timer disguised as a fuel gauge. A real-time map is available that handily shows targets, but constantly switching between it and the Battle Screen isn't fun. The presentation is fine, as it gives the notion of being in a tank, but it comes at a cost of more than half of the game screen.

Reflections: Once you nail the fire/move mechanics, the game opens up a little, but it is just a shame that it is so redundantly threadbare; aside from blowing up the same enemies and objectives, there isn't really much more to do. The landmass of each stage offers nothing new aside from a different color palette, and there is nothing more frustrating than chasing a tank that has turned tail, depleting the fuel gauge further. Still, I suppose simulation games such as this and their progenitor, *Battlezone* (1980), with their locate-and-destroy mantra, eventually paved the way for future classics such as *Desert Strike* (1992). - JE

Battleship

Genre: Strategy
Release Date: Sept. 1993
Developer: NGM Productions
Publisher: Mindscape
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★

In this adaptation of the classic board game, two opposing players place four warships, either horizontally or vertically, on their rectangular grid board (the ship sizes are five, four, three, and two grid spaces). They then take turns firing single shots blindly at the opposing player's grid board in order to land hits to expose the enemy ships and eventually destroy them all. It's a game of luck, simple deduction, and strategy, based upon the ship placement and the size of the four ships that remain to be destroyed. The board game consists of a single shot for a single grid space, but this version adds a few other pattern shots that can be used once per round in order to expose more of the board at one time. The simplistic nature of the game may get old fairly quickly, especially since there are no game options available, and a lack of a two-player mode eliminates the biggest reason why people ever played the original board game to begin with.

Reflections: I understand that doing a two-player mode in a game where both sides are supposed to be blind to one another would be tough, but I would counter that by asking, "What is the point of a video game *Battleship* without a two-player mode?!" For decades, *Battleship* could only be played with two human players (via the honor system), so this title is absolutely perplexing to me, as that's the only real draw to the game. Playing against a cold CPU enemy just seems anti-climactic, you know? Who are you supposed to yell at when you win and say, "You sunk my battleship!" to when you lose? You could talk to yourself while playing, but the fact that you're already reading a *Battleship* review in an NES game guide probably means you're only a couple steps away from an insane asylum as is. – PC

Battletoads

Genre: Beat 'em Up, Action
Release Date: June 1991
Developer: Rare
Publisher: Tradewest
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⋆

This structurally varied game featuring fighting anthropomorphic toads (Rash and Zitz) has the player encountering different level types in order to rescue Princess Angelica and the toads' teammate, Pimple. The game begins as a standard beat 'em up, where the player can punch/kick with combos, use weapons, attack with a charge, kick enemies when they are down, and even pick up enemies to throw them. Attacks usually end with cool flourishes such as stylized finishing hits (with cartoonishly large fists and feet) that send the enemies flying out of the screen, and there are rideable enemies in places. Flies can be eaten sporadically via trusty tongue to replenish health. The game, much to its detriment, doesn't like to dwell in this mode and hops around to different play styles, from subpar 2D platforming and maze navigating to more gimmicky rappelling and vehicle-riding stages, which can be extremely unforgiving. The issue with all of this is that none of it feels as great as the brawling. The game certainly provides a challenge, but not of the satisfying variety, as much of the difficulty stems from poor design choices. The two-player mode actually makes the game harder with its awful continue system (if one player loses all their lives the game ends), furthering the frustration to what could have been a much more focused and solid game. Graphically impressive and technically refined with clever ideas and a cool overall concept, the sum of this amphibious experience is actually less than the toad parts.

Reflections: This was probably the hardest review for me to write objectively, and while I think I was fair to the game, I bet many will disagree. It's a nice looking game. It's an ambitious game. I really sort of dig the snake level. It tries hard, but ultimately I find it to be complete and utter trash – a title that gives the player its best moment in the very first boss fight and proceeds to screw everything up from there. I can think of no other game that is falsely held in higher regard due to rose-tinted nostalgia and unfunny memes. – IF

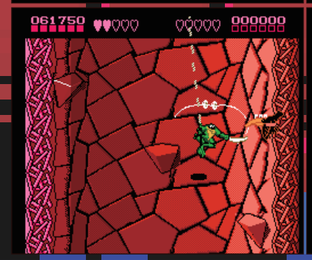
Arguably the most overrated NES game of them all. While parts are cool by themselves, the game never comes together as a unified experience. The speeder bike portion is a perfect example of a stage that is totally out of place – it should have been near the end of the game due to its unforgiving difficulty. The arcade version, a pure beat 'em up, is far superior. The Battletoads concept was an obvious attempt to cash in on *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, but it never caught on. A pilot cartoon episode was created, but no one bit... thankfully. – PC

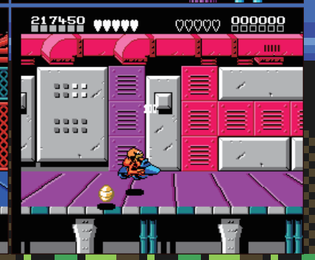
Battletoads & Double Dragon: The Ultimate Team

Genre: Beat 'em Up, Action
Release Date: June 1993
Developer: Rare
Publisher: Tradewest
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★★

What do you get when you cross over two beat-'em-up franchises and mix them together? You get this fun and challenging title. At its core, it's a pure brawler with punches and kicks. The play controls are generally tight and responsive, and a few special moves can be pulled off through double taps on the D-pad and use of the action button. The Battletoads (Pimple, Rash, and Zitz) are a bit more fun to play with, which makes sense given that Rare is the development team here. The Double Dragon twins (Billy and Jimmy Lee) change things up a little, with different movesets than the co-titular amphibians. Enemies attack on the ground and from the air, and they work to trap the heroes between them so they can sap their life bars. This strategy is cheap, as there isn't any way to break out once trapped. While this game is generally a side-scrolling beat-'em-up, there are some variations to keep things interesting, including riding speeder bikes, using turbo rope to rappel downwards in the Colossus ship, and even piloting a space pod in a shooter stage that will test your reflexes. Boss battles get quite difficult, especially later on, and it's likely that you will have to dip into the bank of continues during a few of these. Playing with a friend is a lot of fun, but cooperation is key - being greedy or moving too fast can be your buddy's undoing. Graphically, the game looks quite good, with a nice variety of enemies and level designs/settings. The scrolling is generally smooth, and the visual effects on several stages are neat. There is some flicker, but it's not a dealbreaker. The cool cutscenes between levels tell the story well, and the average sound effects are lifted by the game's excellent soundtrack. This team-up title is definitely worth at least a try.

Reflections: After the nightmares caused by the Turbo Tunnel in *Battletoads*, seeing it again sent me into a cold sweat. Mercifully, Rare made it considerably shorter here. It's not the obstacles that will make you croak; instead, the stage gets annoying when speeder-bike-riding enemies fight you midway through. If you're knocked off of your bike, even with life left, death is automatic. I can't repeat some of the colorful language I used, but I was hopping mad. While the game was tough, the challenge made beating it toadally satisfying. Okay, okay. No more puns. This time. – PS





Bee 52

Genre: Action, Shooter
Release Date: 1992
Developer: Codemasters
Publisher: Camerica
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★⋆

Players take control of a cute, chubby bee who has to fly around and collect honey in this horizontal action title. Bee 52 can fly left to right in environments like a backyard while avoiding insects like spiders, caterpillars and grasshoppers. The bee can attack and defend itself via a spitting projectile attack or by using its stinger. The objective of each stage is to fly into flower buds to collect honey and then return to the hive on the border of the stage area to drop it off. A honeypot meter at the bottom of the screen tracks the progress of how much honey is collected and needed. Players have to watch for ants and swamplings who will attempt to steal collected honey. This, combined with the one-hit deaths and annoying sprinklers, makes the gameplay challenging as the game progresses. Available power-ups can help to some extent, in the form of a super stinger, shot upgrades, bomb, or even a clone named Junior who helps increase firepower and shield Bee 52. Although the gameplay isn't too varied, cute graphics, nice controls, a fun theme, and bubbly music round out a very nice title.

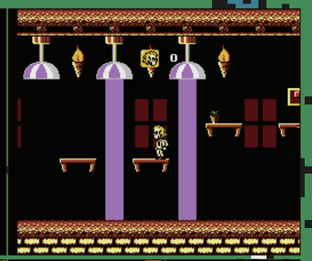
Reflections: The manual is pretty amusing and well written, and it contains "Really Nice Honey" advertising slogans that I am guessing the beehive's marketing department came up with. Say what you want about Codemasters/Camerica, but unlike most of the other unlicensed NES publishers, their games were not only well made (for the most part), but the concepts were usually original and not derivative. *Bee 52* is an adorable and fun game, so hats off to the Codemasters crew. – PC

Beetlejuice

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: May 1991
Developer: Rare
Publisher: LJN
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★⋆

Based loosely on the 1988 comedy film, players take control of Beetlejuice (Betelgeuse), who is tasked to scare a family out of their home. Gameplay takes place in two modes: side-scrolling and overhead. In the side-scrolling levels, Beetlejuice has to platform and fend off monstrous insects, toads, octopuses, and more. There are also switches that must be activated and hazards to be avoided. Beetlejuice can take three hits before death, but is not equipped with a means of attack by default. By stomping on beetles throughout the levels, players will earn voucher points that can be redeemed in shops that are entered. Players can purchase several different types of "scares" that may be activated via the menu. These amount mostly to being able to attack via projectiles of various strengths/lengths, and they last for a limited amount of shots or until the player is hit. These are essential for defeating some enemies in the game to move on, and the end bosses, who are poorly designed and just move constantly forward while firing (they cannot be hit from behind). The design/programming of these levels is dubious, however, due to the vertical movement required, where the player can die if they jump or fall too quickly before the screen can follow the action, resulting in cheap deaths. There are also goals that are too obtuse at times. The overhead levels take place in the house and consist of the player seeking keys and objects to unlock doors or solve simple puzzles to progress on. They usually amount to taking out enemies by tossing bottles, hammers, and using items. While capturing the weird tone of the film and having a spirited soundtrack, the haphazard and strange design choices derail most of the fun, and the difficulty is just too much in some places.

Reflections: As a fan of the bizarre comedy film, it's probably a good thing that I never played this as a kid, as it's just disappointing. There are some decent ideas here, but it just never comes together... a mish-mash of two different gameplay modes that both seem incomplete in design. – PC

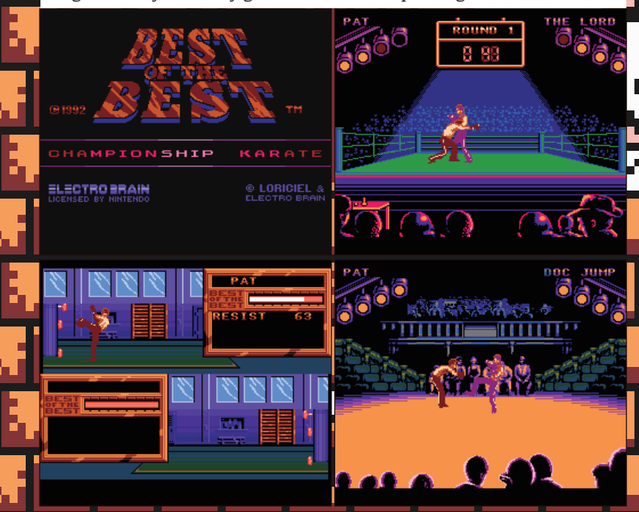


Best of the Best: Championship Karate

Genre: Fighting, Sports
Release Date: Dec. 1992
Developer: Loriciel
Ported by: Movie Software
Publisher: Electro Brain
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★★⋆

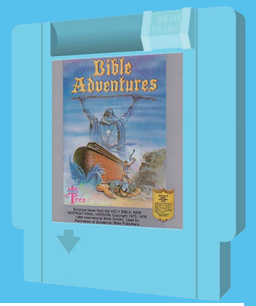
This kickboxing title tasks the player to defeat up to 15 different opponents to become the world champion. Players may begin by naming their fighter and selecting their moveset. Eight different sets are available, each consisting of 13 different punches, kicks, combinations, jump kicks, etc., that may be tested out before being selected. There are dozens of different moves, and all are animated nicely with several rotoscoped frames for each attack. Players may train in three quick mini-games to increase their fighter's strength (damage inflicted when attacking), resistance (damage incurred when hit), and reflexes (parrying ability). The ability to select which fighter to face is given (as well as preview them). However, facing a much stronger fighter will result in a brutal defeat due to their much higher attributes. In timed rounds, gameplay takes place on a single horizontal plane, with each fighter having the ability to go forward, backward, and parry attacks by pressing DOWN on the control pad. Eight attacks are initiated with A/B and the D-pad, and the remaining five are mapped to the D-pad diagonals and UP directly. The various attacks have three different, specific ranges (long, medium, short), and the player will have to use the appropriate one based upon the distance to land it. The amount of damage inflicted is dependent upon the type of strike, the attack strength, and the resistance rating of the one being hit. Each fighter's energy is represented by four lights which will dim when damage is taken. Recovering is possible by resting and parrying/defending attacks successfully. Winning fights will increase the player's attributes and ranking, while losing decreases them. The fighting itself is deep, with choosing the proper attacks at the proper time critical to scoring hits, as button-mashing is useless. Successful players may also be asked to face unknown opponents in the "Kumate," a nonrounded fight to the finish where the player does not know the strength/style of the opponent. Although there are limitations, such as the inability to map attacks to specific button combinations, this highly technical and well-thought-out fighting game should impress action and martial arts fans alike.

Reflections: Released on the SNES (same name) and on the Amiga and TurboGrafx-16 as *Andre Panza Kick Boxing*. The title is an amalgamation of two Jean-Claude Van Damme movies: *Kickboxer* and *Bloodsport* (Kumate portion), while also having the title of a third martial arts film: *Best of the Best*, where James Earl Jones coaches a U.S. Taekwondo team (with Eric Roberts!) against South Korea. I was heavily into martial arts and Van Damme in high school. One summer I watched my VHS dub of *Bloodsport* while practicing kicks. Lame? Maybe, but that practice actually helped me. I continued with martial arts until I tore my ACL in college playing basketball. Now, my leg flexibility is mostly gone... so no more spinning kicks. Sad. – PC



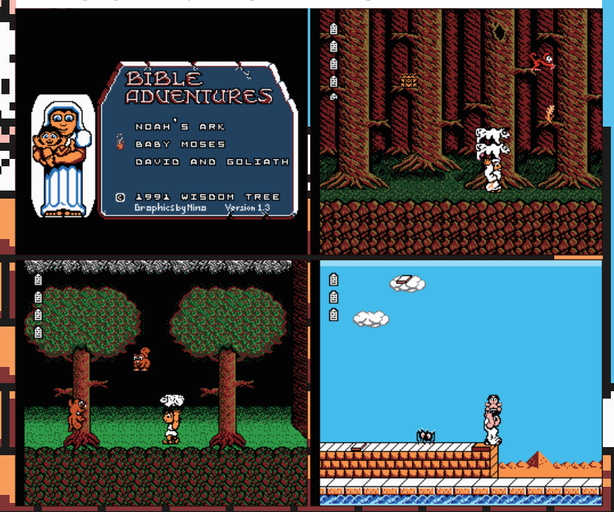
Bible Adventures

Genre: Platformer, Compilation
Release Date: 1990
Developer: Wisdom Tree
Publisher: Wisdom Tree
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Uncommon
★⋆



This Bible-themed game compilation consists of three short-length platformers. In *Noah's Ark*, players take control of the titular character and must seek out and return animals and/or food items in each of five stages. The powerful Noah can lift animals/items (up to five at one time usually), and must carry them back to the entrance of the Ark ship to drop them off. Climbing trees and exploration are key to finding all the animals/items in the level. Noah must contend with pesky critters like snakes and birds that will lift Noah off the ground and force him to drop whatever he was carrying at the time. There are some nicely designed animals here, and it's fairly harmless fun for a bit. *Baby Moses* is somewhat more difficult. Players here take control of Moses' sister who must pick up and carry the baby Moses to the end of the stage, using platforms and springboards to jump higher and even onto clouds. Enemies to avoid include spiders, birds, and Egyptian thugs. The player can toss baby Moses accidentally at any time, which can be harmful/humorous if baby Moses ends up in the river. If that happens, the player will have to restart the level. The third game, *David and Goliath*, puts the player in the role of David the shepherd. Similarly to *Noah's Ark*, players must track down the four sheep in each of the first few levels and carry them to the designated spot to move on. Players must avoid rams, lions, and annoying squirrels who throw nuts at the player. The last level is different, with the player having to scale a mountain via platforms while warding off falling rocks and Philistine soldiers with a slingshot weapon to face Goliath. All three games feature stone tablets that can be picked up, which act as the player's health while displaying a game tip or a Bible verse. Controls are floaty and a bit slippery, which can cause frustration with some of the precarious platforming. Graphics are cute, but the music and sound effects are both below average. There's some quirky fun on display. However, the programming is rough and doesn't match the energy of the ideas offered, perhaps a result of throwing together three different games instead of focusing on one.

Reflections: Shamelessly built upon the *Super Mario Bros. 2* engine, this game holds a special place in my heart. I learned of its existence during my early days of rediscovering the NES in the late '90s on the internet. By visiting websites like *Seanbaby.com* and *TSR's NES Archive*, I was able to learn about strange, unlicensed games, such as *Wally Bear and the No! Gang*. After discovering (to my shock) that a game like *Bible Adventures* existed on the NES, I sought out a trade-in copy at my local Funcoland stores. After almost a year of coming up empty, one day I walked into the Watchung, NJ location and saw that beautiful baby-blue-colored cart sitting on the shelf. It's still one of the highlights of my video game collecting career. – PC



Bible Buffet

Genre: Board Game, Action
Release Date: 1993
Developer: Wisdom Tree
Publisher: Wisdom Tree
Players: 1-4
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★⋆

This game is structured around a *Candyland*-style board with a segmented path snaking around food-themed lands like "Liquid Land," "Fast Food Land," and "Snack Land." Game text, bonuses, wheel, and information are at the bottom of the screen. On your turn you spin a wheel determining how many spaces you move. You might lose a turn, spin again, land on spaces sending you backwards, and so forth. Action sequences, which you must beat to continue, are in overhead view on a black background with absurd scenery themed to the "Land," like Pizza Land's pizzeria levels. Movement is grid-based, and the graphics are simple but effective, with a box at the screen's top tracking score, health, etc. To pass: Collect food for points and find the level exit. But some foods are hostile, including knife-wielding bread slices, exploding eggs, and more bizarre enemies. You can take stationary food and knock anthropomorphic foods unconscious. There are different weapons to find: spoons (slowest), forks (spread pattern), and knives (fastest, longest range). If you thrice fail a level, you'll be allowed to continue regardless. You'll get quizzes on Bonus Squares or the wheel, showing a screen with numbered multiple choice question blanks. The questions aren't on screen, but in a print booklet, inconveniently halting gameplay or rendering it incomplete if lost. The bonuses for correct answers include jumping forward on the board or keys that unlock secrets in Action Squares. At the game's start, you input a code for quiz categories, which have the numbered questions. Yet players can answer randomly and continue. The music's dull and there's unfortunately no AI, making single-player mode boring (it may be better with friends). There are different achievements at the end, like finishing first or earning the most points. As a multiplayer game, it's as good as you make it.

Reflections: The "Bible" part of this game is very light, and without the question booklet, it's not there at all. *Bible Buffet* isn't that bad. It functions like it's supposed to and is playable, apart from the unfortunate decision not to put the questions in the game itself. Plus, the lack of a computer opponent is just inexplicable. What makes *Bible Buffet* memorable is its weirdness. You march into these food lands, assault the food living there, and then collect their corpses, with implied intent to eat them even though they have human-like features. It's just strange, and that's great. If they'd had questions, they could have made a straight quiz game. The *Jeopardy!* games were successful, so there was a desire among children and adults to play competitive trivia. But Wisdom Tree probably couldn't do that, so they chose to make a weird game instead of doing the obvious, and that's why people are still talking about it today. – KN

Big Nose Freaks Out

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: 1992
Developer: Codemasters
Publisher: Camerica
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★★

Big Nose the caveman has to gain back his stolen bones from Leroy the Lizardman in this fast-paced action title. Big Nose gets around by rolling on a stone wheel, which is used to head downhill on angled platforms and slopes, and can be used to pick up speed to traverse the large levels quickly. Usually, lots of exploration is required to travel left-to-right and back again, as well as going up and down on different platform routes to find the right path. Exploration is encouraged, with many areas off the beaten path and hidden rooms, areas, trampolines, and platforms that must be found to proceed. The five worlds are all different, from forest levels to factories to prehistoric towns, with associated enemies on each level to match, like bees, dinosaurs, cavemen, and other various flying, land, and sea critters. Big Nose is armed with a club to defend himself, but can pick up a stone power-up to be able to shoot enemies. Picking up additional power-ups will increase the output up to a three spread fire. If Big Nose is hit by an enemy, the ability to throw the stones will be gone but Big Nose will survive (unless hit again). Other power-ups include limited invincibility and the odd one to reverse the controls. These are randomly strewn throughout the levels, as well as in mushrooms than can be jumped on and bounced off of. Bones also are around, and collecting 25 in one level will result in an extra life. The levels are a blast to play through. The momentum-based gameplay of having to gain speed and transition from platform to platform while fending off enemies and avoiding pits is an exciting endeavor. The sense of speed on display is rare for an NES title. Graphically, the title is only above average, and there's no music during the levels, but that's a fine trade-off for the fast-paced prehistoric rolling action.

Reflections: Boy, I wonder which Sega-produced platformer starring a blue hedgehog named Sonic inspired this? Not that it's a bad thing. At the start it seems like a gimmicky experience, but this is one of those games that sure grows on you. There's a nice mini-cutscene in the beginning that shows Leroy stealing the bones from Big Nose as he's bringing them to the bank for deposit, but it's the only one in the game. I question the use of bones as a form of currency, but then again at least it's based upon something that's real, unlike the magical, nonexistent standard most currency in the world is currently based on. For more of my thoughts on this, check out my upcoming book: *The Ultimate Guide to World Currency and Stock Market Volatility*. – PC

Big Nose the Caveman

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: 1991
Developer: Codemasters
Publisher: Camerica
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

Help Big Nose catch his dinosaur dinner is this prehistoric-themed game. The player has a basic club attack that can be upgraded in two ways. It can be made to attack faster, and it can gain the ability to hurl stones. The latter is the most useful and can be upgraded to a three stone spread shot. One hit from any of the dinos, bugs, fish, and other cartoony enemies will cause Big Nose to lose his powers quickly, which can leave our hero in some tricky spots. Luckily, every few levels a shop will appear allowing those boosts to be purchased back rather cheaply. Floating spells and extra lives can also be purchased there. The graphics are serviceable, and the levels contain enough variety, from basic prehistoric levels to trips through the sky, to keep one engaged. The overall game is decent but basic fare. The control feels floaty and off, and there are some odd bugs like the hit counter for bosses not always resetting after deaths. While certainly amateurish in execution, the title is still somewhat fun.

Reflections: This was the first unlicensed cart I ever owned, purchased back in 1997 or so. While the game is unremarkable, it was the key that opened up the weird, fun world of off-brand, unofficial NES games and accessories, which are a large part of what makes the NES such an interesting system for players, collectors, and game history buffs. – IF

I'd like to think that in the prehistoric game universe, characters like Big Nose, Bonk, Joe & Mac, and Chuck Rock all know each other. I picture Chuck Rock being the uncle of Bonk, while Big Nose is the unshaven, wild father of Joe & Mac. When Bonk and Joe & Mac get together to play Little League games with clubs and dinosaur eggs, it always gets a little uncomfortable when Big Nose shows up and drinks a few too many beers out of his caveman cooler. – PC

Bigfoot

Genre: Racing
Release Date: July 1990
Developer: Beam Software
Publisher: Acclaim Entertainment
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

This monster truck racing game alternates between two distinct modes. The first is a top-down race that focuses on beating your opponent to the finish line using buzzsaws and turbo boosts, while obtaining money for truck upgrades. The controls in these segments are slippery and loose, and racing an opponent locked to the same screen means everything comes down to the final seconds. The second segment, a side view race that is anything from a car crush to a hill climb, is frustratingly hard to control with any precision, and that's if one can even figure out how to get the beast off the starting line. Movement in these segments requires rapidly wiggling the control pad left and right, turbo boosting with B, and shifting with A. Careful though, as A shifts both up and down based on incredibly picky timing! A game based on monster truck racing is a good idea for simple, arcade-style fun. Unfortunately, every aspect of this game has that rushed feeling so commonly associated with games based on pre-existing licenses. The detail in the monster truck sprites during the side view race portions of the game is fairly intricate, so the game isn't without a positive, but browsing pictures of actual monster trucks would be a better time.

Reflections: I bought this title from a dude who worked at a flea market stall where I got most of my NES games at in the late '90s. Right after this transaction, I witnessed my favorite flea market blowout ever. The kid selling me the game was accused by a co-worker of stealing his *Star Trek* cards. They quibbled passionately until the owner broke up the situation by bellowing at one of the boys to fetch him "a hot ham and cheese sandwich." Thanks, *Bigfoot*. – IF

Bill & Ted's Excellent Video Game Adventure

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: Apr. 1991
Developer: Rocket Science Productions
Publisher: LJN
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★

California teens Bill and Ted must set history right in this adventure title based on the hit film. Each level consists of the player controlling either Bill or Ted from an isometric overhead perspective. Players are tasked to track down a historical figure in each level by collecting clues from people hanging around and by finding historically related items. Where to find such items and people is not simple, due to the obtuse clues provided. It is essential that the player use the manual's maps to navigate around. Otherwise, it is very easy to get lost on the fairly large levels. Bad guys will attempt to capture Bill/Ted and throw them into the dungeon/jail to impede their progress, but can be fended off with items found within the levels, such as pudding cups that enemies will run after. What could be fun is absolute tedium due to the nonlinear nature, unclear goals, large maps, and monotonous gameplay. The graphics are above average, and the characters and settings of each environment are depicted well enough. However, entering each historical level is a drag – an unnecessary and idiotic phone number dialing mini-game that frustrates and adds absolutely nothing to the game. The only true highlight here is the in-game dialog that does reflect the movie's light-hearted comedic tone quite well. Other than that, this is a pretty bogus experience.

Reflections: Sometimes developers can be a little too overzealous. While I applaud the design team attempting to emulate the flow and structure of *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure* to a degree (a very fun and well-done comedy), I think they bit off a bit more than they could chew here. It's sad when I suggest a game be dumbed down for an audience, but a standard platformer based on the film probably would have fared a bit better.

The conversations that Bill and Ted have with the random people in the historical eras are nonsensical, and it's very difficult to play timeline psychologist to guess what the proper response is to not piss them off and gain the proper information. I'm not sure if the developers were trying to accurately depict what it would be like for someone out of time to try and communicate with someone who lived 500 years in the past, but that's the effect it appears as in the game. – PC

Bill Elliott's NASCAR Challenge

Genre: Racing
Release Date: Dec. 1991
Developer: Distinctive Software
Publisher: Konami
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

In the first racing game to feature a NASCAR license and official NASCAR tracks, players pick from one of three licensed car models (a Pontiac Grand Prix, Chevy Lumina, or Ford Thunderbird) and take it to the track to race against a list of the era's top drivers. While each car's base stats feel very similar to each other, there are aesthetic differences. Each vehicle can be tinkered with before the race to adjust everything from tires to spoiler angle. Players can choose to auto qualify before main races, which will put them in the middle of the pack without any trouble, or they can manually qualify and try for the top spot which requires considerably more effort. There are oval courses like Daytona Beach and some street type courses such as Sears Point, adding some nice variety. Cars can be put in manual transmission for more control and higher top speed, or automatic transmission for less hassle. The straightforward oval courses benefit from manual transmission whereas all but the best would likely do well to choose automatic for any course with a number of twists and turns. Graphics are passable and incorporate some interesting tricks to create a sense of movement, and music is inoffensive. This is nicely featured and would be a commendable effort for a licensed game if it played remotely well. Unfortunately, the handling is extremely floaty, and while Novice difficulty feels too easy, the Rookie and Pro levels feature infuriating AI that does the already poor controls no favors. There's a lot of nice window dressing surrounding this title, but it's covering up something much less enticing.

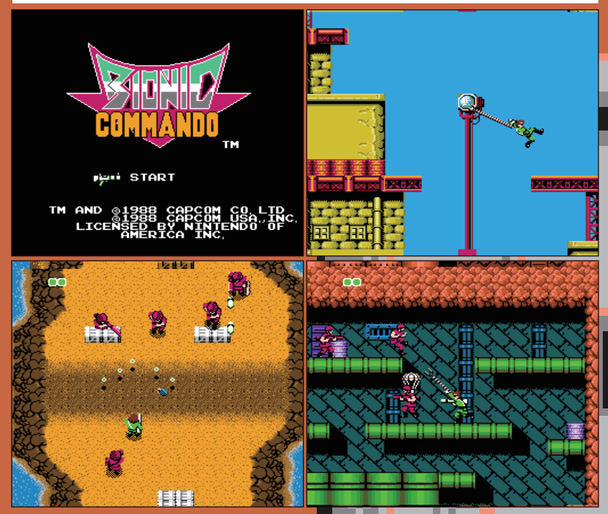
Reflections: Whether it's arcade-like or realistic, a racing game's success depends on mainly two things: a great sense of speed and satisfying controls. This game has neither. Not only is overtaking another car slow and boring, but one is likely to bounce back and forth a fair number of times in the process. – IF

Bionic Commando

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Dec. 1988
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★⯪

The player controls Ladd Spencer, a super soldier tasked with rescuing Super Joe (from *Commando*). The player moves on an overhead map and then descends onto enemy or neutral territory. The player selects from available weapons and other gained items (offensive and defensive) before exploring the area. Ladd can attack enemies using his gun, but the real draw of the game is the use of Ladd's bionic arm, which extends to attack enemies, grab items, and most importantly, move around the area. There's no jump function, but the bionic arm can lift the player up to levels above and swing Ladd horizontally, and can even allow swinging continually without hitting the ground. This is not only essential for getting around the level also but very fun. The levels are varied, and each offers something a little different with their nice design, culminating with a boss fight and the required destruction of a power core. All entail extensive use of the bionic arm to traverse the levels, but some also contain deft swinging over pitfalls and spikes, which demand control expertise. Along the way, using communication centers allows the player to gain clues/hints, progress, and learn more of the story. The game has slight RPG and adventure elements, such as building up your health meter by collecting dropped bullets from enemies, as well as seeking out and finding new weapons/items in enemy/neutral areas. There are even short, overhead run-and-gun stages that are triggered when enemy vans intercept the player's helicopter on the map. With nice graphics and sounds, memorable music, and an engaging story, players will be rewarded with a unique, well-thought-out, and challenging game.

Reflections: I love *Bionic Commando*. The bionic arm is unlike just about anything else on the system, with maybe the exception of the party mouse in *Streemerz* from *Action 52*. It's strange that this game is not really underrated, but under-heralded as an excellent game. While you often hear about *DuckTales* and *Contra*, Ladd Spencer and his radical sunglasses doesn't get nearly as much love. This game's enemy organization (spoiler!) is actually a Nazi organization in the Famicom version. Swastikas and other Nazi references were removed in the U.S. version, but the zombie Hitler who gets his (spoiler!) head blown apart at the end still exists in arguably the most graphically violent NES scene ever. – PC

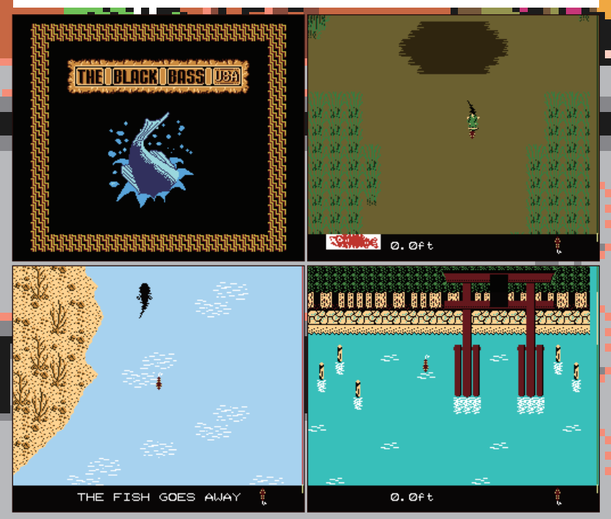


The Black Bass

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Sept. 1989
Developer: Another
Publisher: Hot-B
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

With 200 anglers competing for number one in a summer series of fishing tournaments, players attempt to catch the largest average bass weight in each contest. Other fish, such as pike and rainbow trout, can be caught but do not improve player standings. Players finishing in the top five of their class can move up to the next. Competition begins in Class C, and the target is to reach the top of Class A by October. This takes place over the course of 12 tournaments. Each tournament is timed, so staying focused is important! First, players must position their boat on an overhead map of a lake. They can check their chosen spot's weather and likelihood for bass, change lures, and view stats for the day's competition. The second-to-last option is the cast screen. Pressing A casts or reels the line in, and the trick is to make the lure seem realistic to the fish. Reeling it in bit by bit while making it look lively with a left and right motion generally works - a fish shadow will appear if this is done correctly. Maintain this action, and the fish will bite. Once it's on the hook, players can reel or thumb the line and attempt to steer the fish left or right to avoid obstacles that can cause players to lose the fish and their lure. Over time, the fish tires out; its stamina is represented at the bottom of the screen by a sad picture of a red fish that slowly turns to bones. The fish is automatically caught in a net when reeled to the bottom of the screen. Bigger bass appear if the right lure and color are used in coordination with the weather and time of day. If an undesirable fish is hooked, the Select button may be pressed to attempt unhooking the line. The gameplay is actually quite fun, but the graphics are merely serviceable, and the sound is downright grating. After a while, the whole endeavor can become repetitive. This isn't an unforgivable sin, but the game is best played in small bursts.

Reflections: *The Black Bass* is one of the first fishing games I played and one of the earliest attempts to portray fishing in a somewhat realistic way. Released in the United States and also known as The *Black Bass USA*, this is actually the second entry in the series. The first release never made it here, and the Japanese version's title screen is a radical-looking fish gangster. We missed out. – IF

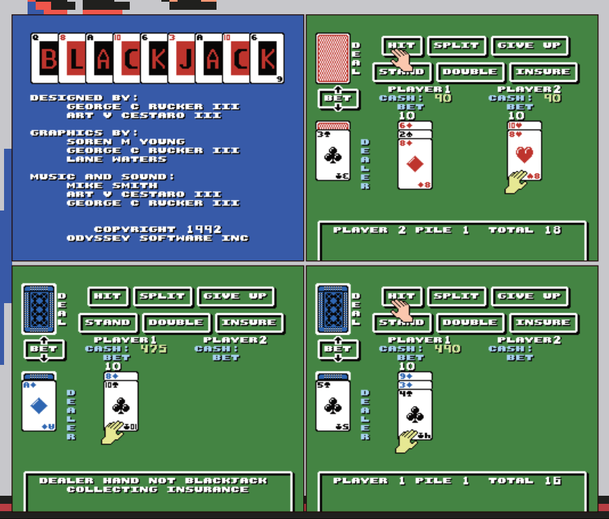


Blackjack

Genre: Gambling
Release Date: 1992
Developer: Odyssey Software
Publisher: American Video Entertainment
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Rare
★★

Like the name says, this is a simple game of casino blackjack. The players bets their amount and then draws cards versus the dealer to see who can get closest to a count of 21 without going over. The dealer must hit on 16 and stand on 17. A "blackjack" hand of an ace plus a 10, jack, king, or queen automatically wins the hand (and pays out 3:2). It's simple, but there is strategy and probability logic that can be employed based upon the card count already dealt, and what upturned card the dealer is showing. The presentation here is very simple in terms of graphics (not much is required for a blackjack game anyway), and the music/sound. There is a bevy of options available including the color of the card deck, card deck style, and even the amount of card decks used in the game (which can be useful if attempting to practice "card counting"). The strange aspect of the game that seems to undo almost everything else is this rule in place: If the player is dealt five cards without going over 21, they automatically win. Just about no casinos use this outdated rule. If you want to play blackjack, the game is fine, but it seems like there should and could be more here.

Reflections: How do you review a game that gives the player exactly what they want, but is extremely simple, especially for an NES title? One could say that anyone paying $39.99 just for an NES blackjack game would be out of their mind and getting ripped off. But think about this: What if this game satiated some blackjack fiends who played this game at home instead of heading out to their local casino and wasting away their kids' college fund? AVE wasn't just making a simple video game; they were in fact performing a public service! – PC



Blades of Steel

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Dec. 1988
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Konami
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★★

This fast-paced, arcade-style hockey game consists of exhibition and tournament modes, both available in three different difficulties. Players select one of several teams, each with different uniforms and skills/weaknesses. Skating on the ice is smooth, and reacts with a slight slipperiness to reflect the real-life counterpart. Passing and shooting are both easy and intuitive, with aiming for the opponent's net accomplished via an automatically moving arrow at the goal line which will stop at the moment of the shot. On defense, players control their goalie and also defensive players who can body check into opposing players to try to knock them down and retrieve the puck. Checking continually can also engage an impressive feature – the fighting mode. Here, the action switches to a rudimentary but nice one-on-one fist-fighting mini-game where players can block, punch high, and punch low. The losing player will be dragged away to the penalty box by the referee, and the winning team will get a temporary player advantage. While not a simulation, this title is well-polished and very fun. The music is good and includes some authentic ice hockey arena tunes, and excellent voice samples are littered throughout the game, including "Face off!" and almost constant "With the pass!" whenever a pass occurs. These elements, combined with nice touches such as the third-person penalty shot mode, intermission mini-games of *Gradius*, and one of the most exciting two-player sports modes on the NES, help nudge this into the upper echelon of NES sports titles.

Reflections: *Blades of Steel* is an iconic game, not just in the realm of sports, but in general for the 8-bit era of gaming. It's one of those crossover games that not only sports fans bought and played, but also gamers in general. While not impossible, it's not often easy to translate a sports title into a relatable and fun game for the nonfan, but Konami did a bang-up job here. I played a good amount of street hockey in my day, so of course *Blades of Steel* was popular in my neighborhood. I still remember the makeshift tournament that was held once with all the older kids on the block, and how I managed to get very far despite being the youngest. I was also scared to be in the house of a 16-year-old who may or may not have been a criminal. Hey, those Calgary Flames and St. Louis Blues sweaters didn't steal themselves from the Herman's Sporting Goods store, did they? – PC

Blaster Master

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: Nov. 1988
Developer: Tokai Engineering
Publisher: Sunsoft
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★★½

Help Jason rescue his pet frog by piloting the highly mobile tank, Sophia the 3rd, through a number of maze-like, platforming levels. Sophia can fire in multiple directions, jump, and acquire three different special weapons such as homing missiles. Equally important are the upgrades Sophia can receive, like Crusher and Hyper beams that can take out various obstacles as players search for the exit to the next level. These levels are large and are very fun to explore, especially because Jason can exit Sophia and, in tiny human form, explore the levels with his pea shooter and get into the tighter and harder to reach places on the map. This isn't just for show, as many of these small corridors will lead players to doors that open up to entirely different top-down run and gun shooter segments, also maze-like in structure, in which Jason must find the items or the boss contained within. With large sprites and enemies, these areas look quite nice and are an interesting complement to the equally nice-looking terrain forming the main side-scrolling mazes. With tons of variety, great music and graphics, and two distinctly different modes of play, this is a pretty easy game to recommend. The challenge is quite high and can cause frustration until the early levels become second nature, but the game is absolutely fantastic and worth the time investment.

Reflections: I'd learn to drive all over again if I could go out and purchase a Sophia the 3rd of my very own. Actually, a Jurassic Park jeep transport might do as well. – IF

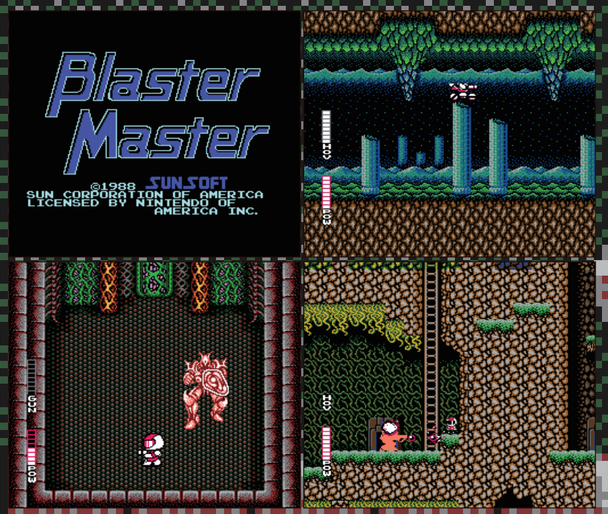
I'm not entirely sure why this title isn't regarded more like a top classic in the NES library along with games like *The Legend of Zelda* or *Metroid*. No respect for Jason and his amphibious friend. The Japanese version of this game has an entirely different story involving stopping an alien invasion on a planet called Sophia the 3rd (not the name of the vehicle), and did not involve a pet frog in any way. Our loss or theirs? – PC

The Blue Marlin

Genre: Sports
Release Date: July 1992
Developer: Mint
Publisher: Hot-B
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★½

Hit the beautiful coastal waters and become the sailfishing king! The object is to catch as many sailfish (ideally blue marlin) as possible and have the highest average weight by the end of each timed competition. Other fish, such as dorado or barracuda, can also be caught; they don't count towards your average weight, but they do give you experience that increases stats such as strength, making it easier to land the big ones in the later contests. This isn't lake fishing, so instead of casting, you drag (troll) your line behind your boat. Play starts in an overhead boat view where you can set the length of the line and the type/depth of the lure. Then it's time to motor around, trying to get a fish to bite by watching schools of smaller fish or paying attention to seagulls. Once a fish is on the line, the action cuts to another screen to reel it in. Drag can be set to slow the line, and you can pump or struggle left and right to tire out the fish. A picture at the lower right shows the status of the fish's exhaustion and the hook's strength. The fish fights are exciting! Sometimes little events even pop up, such as smoking gloves or the fish jumping and reeling out more line, which just adds to the presentation. There are plenty of fishing spots, as each of the four tournament areas has three locations to choose from. The graphics are great - the overhead map shows little people playing on the beaches, and the fishing screen has an excellent fisher and reel on display. Furthermore, the soundtrack is wonderful. While it can initially be tricky to figure out the best way to fish, this game is seriously fun once you learn the controls. This should be a winner, even for people who have no interest in fishing.

Reflections: I hate golf in real life. I hate tennis in real life. And I definitely hate fishing in real life. However, all of these sports can make for great video games. I played this title and its predecessor *The Black Bass* at a friend's house when I was young, and they always struck me as fun. When I retried both of them a couple of years ago, I realized I no longer knew how to play, but reviewing them has given me a chance to learn and enjoy them all over again. The Black Bass series would strongly continue with several sequels on the SNES, Game Boy, PlayStation, Game Boy Advance, and PC. – IF



The Blues Brothers

Genre: Platformer
Release Date: Sept. 1992
Developer: Titus France
Publisher: Titus Software
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★

Based loosely on the 1980 comedy film, players take control of Jake and/or Elwood who must travel through five levels of platforming madness. Levels sprawl both horizontally and vertically, and are filled with various obstacles and accoutrements like stairs, platforms, ladders, springs, elevators, and much more. Players have no means of attacking enemies and must simply avoid them or else suffer death after three touches. The biggest hazards to avoid in the game, however, are the many parts of the levels where spikes are placed on the ceilings and floors. These are seemingly everywhere, preventing the player from making many jumps, and they are often placed in a plethora of blind spots where a player could potentially land. These make going through the levels a painstakingly slow chore. The pinpoint controls in running, jumping, and crawling are offset by the level design shortcomings, as seen in the terrible enemy placement. In various areas, hitting an enemy off of a jump is almost automatic (especially the first time playing through), and some enemies (like the annoying green sparks) will lock onto and follow the player, making passing areas without taking damage very tough. And even though there are spots where players can jump onto some enemies, such as dogs, in order to ride them safely over spikes and into other enemies, there are inexplicably spots where players are required to take hits to move on. A couple of continues are available, and the graphics and Blues Brothers tunes are quality, but most reasonable players will not have the desire to finish this extremely short game (under 20 minutes if you know what you're doing and memorize the trap spots). The cherry on top of this disaster is the strange, two-player simultaneous mode where only a single player is tracked along, leaving the second player mercifully behind off screen.

Reflections: What a mess. This is one of those early '90s titles that was on both the SNES and NES and, like other releases, was vastly inferior to its 16-bit brother and produced in limited quantities. There was obviously very little time and effort put into this, with some of the worst level design I have ever seen, so then why bother with an NES version at all? Were these companies obligated to produce versions for both systems by the big N? Nothing about this game makes much sense, and that includes the strange licensing choice. The Blues Brothers had not appeared on Saturday Night Live in forever, the film came out 12 years earlier, and the heart of the act, John Belushi, was long gone. Maybe Dan Aykroyd sold Titus Software a bill of goods and gave them some Crystal Head Vodka to entice them? – PC

Bo Jackson Baseball

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Oct. 1991
Developer: Beam Software
Publisher: Data East
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

This baseball simulation features a single game mode as well as a four team playoff. The gameplay itself is fairly standard for a baseball game, with the exception being the strong elements of pitching/batting. Before each pitch, the batter/pitcher both select the type of swing/pitch they wish to attempt before the normal game execution occurs. This added element adds a degree of strategy that doesn't exist in most of the other console baseball games. The batting portion also does a better job than most baseball games in accurately simulating the judgment of an incoming pitch in terms of its speed and placement and whether you should swing or not. Play in the field is fairly standard. The high number of adjustable options, such as music on/off, number of innings, and ability to choose the batting perspective from the pitcher or batter, etc., allows a high degree of customization not seen in other baseball titles. The presentation is also nice, with good digitized voice samples and better than average graphics, especially the large sprites of the batters and pitchers. The biggest shortcomings lie in the fact that there are mock players/teams and that there is no season mode to compete in. Otherwise, this is a solid baseball experience.

Reflections: One of the best things about this game is the cartoon cutscene that occurs when there is a close play, with the manager and umpire going back and forth arguing "He was safe!" and "Yoooou're Out!" Bo Jackson was the man in the late '80s/early '90s. He was the first person in a long time to play both professional baseball and football at the same time, and he was great at both. He did pretty well for himself, and and even had a huge Nike marketing campaign entitled "Bo Knows," which depicted him playing almost every sport/game imaginable. He faded out due to injury after a few years, but he was a phenom for a short while. What does this have to do with the game other than a cash-in licensing attempt? Nothing! – PC

Bomberman

Genre: Action, Maze
Release Date: Jan. 1989
Developer: Hudson Soft
Publisher: Hudson Soft
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⯪

Players control the roundheaded, antenna-sporting hero as he uses explosives to navigate top-down mazes full of enemies and destructible blocks in search of the stairs to the next level. Players lay down bombs that will explode after a handful of seconds. Blowing up blocks will reveal power-ups that can increase the number of bombs Bomberman can drop, the range of the explosions, and other useful boosts. While searching for the stairs hidden under one of the blocks, players must contend with enemies that they can destroy by catching them in the blast zone of a bomb. Dopey enemies like the springy bobblehead creatures will make this easy at first, but later levels require a good amount of planning and foresight. Getting caught in one's own explosion by getting cornered or not paying attention will result in just as many deaths, if not more, than by enemies. Graphics are plain but serviceable and convey a cartoony sense of humor. There is only one song for the levels, and while it's blippy and catchy, it will wear on those in for a long session quite quickly. The game could have benefitted from a two-player mode, as the design is perfect for it, but single-player mode holds up just fine and perfectly introduces players to the Bomberman universe with good, simple fun.

Reflections: I'm amazed at the completeness of this game's design on its first release. With the exception of the addition of multiplayer, the basic structure of this game has remained unchanged for decades. Proof that great ideas can hold their own in any era. – IF

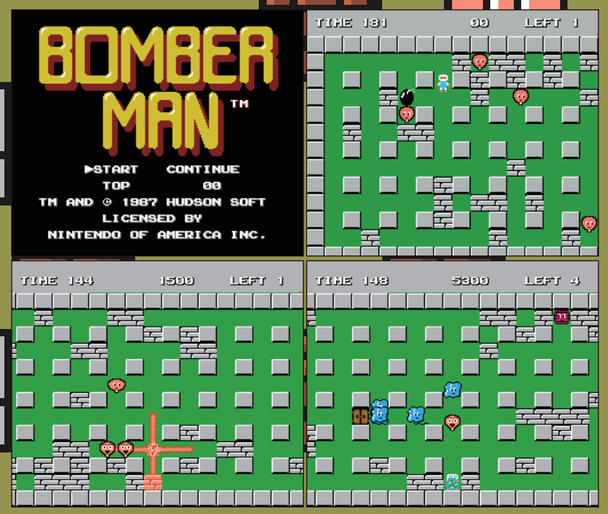
This is a great example of a game where the multiplayer action far eclipses the single player mode. What's that? There's no multiplayer in this version? Hmmm, in that case, go out and play *Super Bomberman* on the SNES with four of your friends and the Hudson Soft multitap! Or maybe look at the next entry. – PC

Bomberman II

***Dynablaster** (PAL)*
Genre: Action, Maze
Release Date: Feb. 1993
Developer: Hudson Soft
Publisher: Hudson Soft
Players: 1-3 (simultaneous)
Special Features: NES Four Score / Satellite compatible, Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★★

Blow the heck out of everything as the adorable Bomberman works his way through nearly 50 stages of destructible mazes and cute but deadly enemies. The object in each level is twofold. All enemies must be blown to smithereens, but the door to the next floor must be uncovered as well. The game takes place in an overhead view, and its various levels each comprise a mix of destructible and indestructible blocks. Bombs can be dropped that explode after a short time; these can obliterate blocks, enemies, and the unwary player. Blasting blocks occasionally reveals power-ups, but even those can be destroyed by explosions, so caution is key. Some power-ups, such as the ability to drop more bombs simultaneously or extend the explosion range, carry over with each life. Others, such as remote-detonated bombs, vanish after a death. It's important to search for and grab these added abilities when possible because they are not very common in the main game. The graphics are colorful and all-around pleasant to look at, and every world has a new theme to the tiles making up its stages. Unfortunately, while the number of enemies increases and some trickier baddies are introduced, the experience stays largely the same throughout the entire game. No new mechanics really appear. Where the game gets better is in its multiplayer modes. Although opponents cannot be controlled by the CPU, up to three friends can join in the fun. The goal is to destroy opponents in levels similar to those in the single-player mode but with no enemies and a greater frequency of power-ups. It's a fantastic time and where the game shows promise. The main campaign is fine, but it can be a slow affair and begin to feel like a real grind - multiplayer is where the action is at. It's worth considering this the entry point to what the series would become, as it lets players experience the two main modes.

Reflections: Bomberman, as a series, is not generally remembered for its single-player gameplay. This title was the first entry to introduce multiplayer in its most basic form. As the series went on, many later installments focused mostly on multiplayer, with some versions supporting up to 10 simultaneous participants. A single-player mode is included in most releases, but it is often more of a side mode or afterthought. - IF



Bonk's Adventure

Genre: Platformer
Release Date: Jan. 1994
Developer: Red Company, Atlus
Ported by: AI
Publisher: Hudson Soft
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Rare
★★★★⯪

Caveman Bonk sets out to save Moon Princess from the evil King Drool in this prehistoric platformer. Bonk's method of attack is his oversized, bald head. He can attack with his head when standing/walking, by jumping from underneath an enemy and striking, or by using a jumping spin attack where Bonk will come down and strike an enemy with his head while upside down. Bonk can then rebound off the enemy to possibly hit them again or attack another enemy. Constantly flipping in the air can also extend the distance of a jump. Controls are very smooth and precise, which makes "bonking" the dinosaurs and other prehistoric enemies very fun and satisfying. Animation is fluid, and the graphics are very detailed and colorful, representing some of the very best the NES has to offer. The levels have a nice variety of backgrounds/settings as well as methods they are traversed, including some vertical sections (Bonk can grab and climb humorously with his teeth) and underwater swimming ones. Health items are plentiful, and Bonk can power-up in two different intervals to become stronger via meat obtained from flowers. Technically superior and built upon a charming and original main character, this hard-headed and unique title is a blast to play.

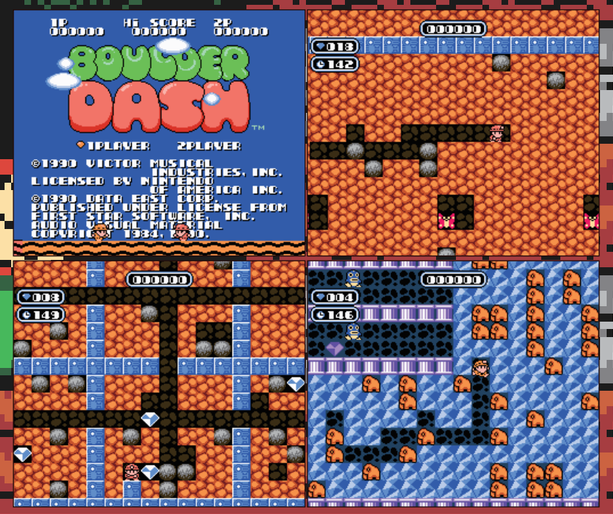
Reflections: *Bonk's Adventure* was the flagship title for the TurboGrafx-16 game system, which was released in 1989. The TurboGrafx-16 had moderate success for about a year or two, but then was destroyed in the marketplace once the Sega Genesis started to come more into its own by 1991, the same year the SNES was released. For all its shortcomings and marketing failures, it's undeniable that Bonk was the only true mascot for the system, as he appeared on most of the TurboGrafx's marketing materials, and even on promo items such as "Bonk for President" bumper stickers (note: he only garnered two percent of the national vote in 1992). Due to the direct console competition, almost none of the TurboGrafx titles released by Hudson Soft were also published on the NES. By 1993, though, the TurboGrafx was just about dead in North America, so I'm figuring Hudson Soft didn't mind publishing a port to the NES in early 1994. Too bad it didn't matter either way, since the NES was also on its way out the door by then as well, so very few copies of this game were produced and sold. – PC

Boulder Dash

Genre: Action
Release Date: June 1990
Developer: First Star Software
Ported by: Sakata SAS
Publisher: JVC
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⯪

The player takes control of a miner who travels/digs around on an underground tile board in search of jewels and gems. The player is given a specific number of gems to collect in a time limit, and must gather them while avoiding various enemies, falling boulders, and other objects. Some gems are out in the open for easy collection, but others can only be obtained by dropping boulders on and destroying enemies, which is accomplished by digging out the earth beneath the object to allow it to fall. Pressing A or B will lock the miner in position, and then pressing the D-pad will result in digging in that adjacent square without entering it; this is useful when in tight spots. It starts out simply, but the challenge quickly ramps up, almost too much so, as the player will soon find themselves constantly scrambling out of the way of falling objects without real time to think about a strategy for getting at diamonds safely. A frustrating design choice has boulders/objects being able to slide left/right to an adjacent empty spot before falling down. It doesn't make much sense and will cause many deaths, especially when trying to run beneath some to avoid an enemy. Presentation is solid, though, with nice graphics, an overhead world map, and a password feature.

Reflections: *Boulder Dash* is a game that I always forget exists until someone reminds me, and then I usually proceed to confuse it with *Crystal Mines*. Then I feel bad because *Crystal Mines* is not as good a game as this one is. My apologies, *Boulder Dash*. – PC



A Boy and His Blob: Trouble on Blobolonia

Genre: Puzzle, Platformer
Release Date: Jan. 1990
Developer: Imagineering
Publisher: Absolute Entertainment
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

Help Blob get back to his home planet of Blobonia and stop the evil Emperor in this humorous but flawed puzzle adventure. When fed jelly beans in flavors including licorice, punch, and tangerine, Blob can change into useful items, such as ladders, holes, and trampolines, that assist the boy in traversing the side-scrolling subway and caves in order to collect treasures. This loot is used to purchase vitamins that become ammo near the end of the adventure. The jelly beans are in finite supply, which can cause the boy to get stuck, forcing the game to be reset. Blind trial-and-error experimentation is often required in order to progress, but at least beans can also be used instead of performing leaps of faith offscreen, as the camera follows their trajectory. Furthermore, Blob's least favorite flavor, ketchup, respawns him onscreen if he is lost, which can alleviate sticky situations. Late into the title, eating an orange jelly bean turns Blob into a Vitablaster gun, stifling whatever puzzle pacing the experience had, as many other transformations are hardly used at all. With poor momentum-controlled character movement and even worse puzzle implementation, this game shows promise but fails to be fun.

Reflections: This quirky and massively unique title is let down by the most important thing - it just isn't enjoyable. Having to turn Blob into a hole to blindly drop to a screen below shouldn't have to be the way to play the game, but more often than not, that's the case. Cool transformations such as a blowtorch, a coconut bowling ball, and a rocket are only used once, if at all, so what's the point? More helpful items, such as ladders, bridges, and umbrellas that slow falling, are called upon frequently, so the balance is way off. There are 14 jelly bean varieties, and the game doesn't say what each does until after one is eaten. This is a pain that calls for pen and paper, which can also be used for map making because you can easily get lost. The introduction of weaponry kills the game pacing entirely, as it isn't necessary and just prolongs the experience by forcing you into collecting treasure to buy ammo. At least the Wii version from 2009 makes up for it. – JE

Bram Stoker's Dracula

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Sept. 1993
Developer: Probe Software
Publisher: Sony Imagesoft
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

Attempt to defeat Dracula in this action platformer loosely based on the movie of the same name. Graphics are very plain and don't do the best job of setting the mood in this horror-themed game, yet the important scenes like Transylvania, Castle Dracula, and the Crypts are all represented. Enemies are predictable fare with bats, ghosts, and skeletons all roaming about the scenery. Music is grating almost immediately. The score was obviously trying to go for something epic sounding, but each track is a mess of rapidly ascending and descending notes that is about as pleasant as a spider bite. Fortunately, the game is actually quite decent. Jonathan Harker's main weapon is a glowing punch, but additional weapons such as throwing axes and torches are waiting to be found in oddly out of place question mark boxes. Each stage is broken up into day/night levels and is a small, exploration focused area one must navigate. At the end of the night portion, players will fight one of Dracula's forms, such as shadows or a wolf. A short timer and easily wasted auxiliary weapons, along with an overall generic feel, bring this one down. For a basic, monster-themed game though, it's worth a play.

Reflections: I played this long after I tried the abysmal SNES/Genesis games based on the movie and expected it to be just as awful. Not so! While there is nothing special about it, the game controls well, and it actually feels like some effort was put into the design. I was really hoping for a Fire Flower the first time I saw the familiar "?" box – IF

The "?" blocks are funny to behold – like the developer team could not think of any other reasonable place to have items stored for the player. Whatever happened to good old-fashioned treasure chests? – PC

Break Time: The National Pool Tour

Genre: Billiards
Release Date: Jan. 1993
Developer: Opera House
Publisher: FCI
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★½

This billiards game features several modes with the ability to play four types of pool games: rotation, 8-ball, 9-ball, and 14-1 rack game. Players may also practice any game type, set up their own shots, or even view several nifty trick shots. The main mode is the national pool tour, where players must take on five different players across the United States in the best two out of three games in 9-ball. Gameplay on the table is everything you'd expect in a pool game: players have the ability to aim, put english or masse on the ball to get it to curve, follow, or draw. There's even the ability to jump the ball. Finally, the player can adjust the strength of the shot before execution. The ball physics are solid here, with all the angles and use of cushions in sinking shots spot on, with thinking beforehand and always planning at least one shot ahead being critical to success. The professional rules of billiards apply here, so make sure not to scratch or else you'll put your opponent at a huge advantage, especially in a game like 9-ball, where a good player can "run the table" and sink all the remaining shots in a row to take the game. Presentation here is nice, with some lively tunes, quality graphics (with visual representations of the various players), and some decent voice samples. Obviously, your level of love for pool will affect your enjoyment, but there's not much else you can ask for out of an 8-bit billiards game.

Reflections: This, *Championship Pool*, or *Side Pocket* – these are your choices for NES billiards games. While *Side Pocket* and *Championship Pool* came first, *Break Time* upped the ante by adding lots more modes and game types, and a very rudimentary career mode. I'm sure if there ever was a fourth NES billiards game, it would have added a create a player mode, the ability to travel to dirty pool halls and select who you wanted to hustle, and the ability to customize the seedy roach motel room that you live in.

OK, there is a fourth billiards game, *Lunar Pool*, but all that does is put you on the moon! There's no intergalactic hustling of alien players to be found! – PC

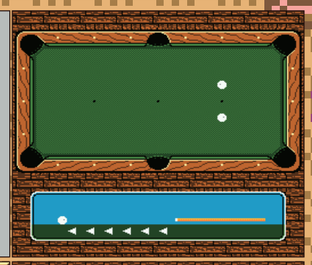
BreakThru

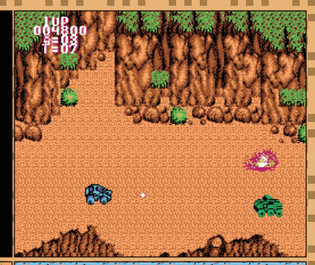
Genre: Action, Shooter
Release Date: Nov. 1987
Developer: Data East
Publisher: Data East
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

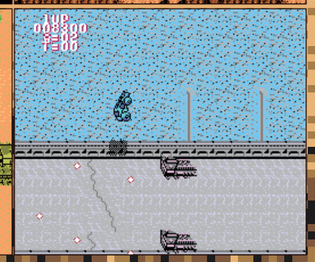
A secret fighter jet plane has been stolen, and it's up to the player in an armored car to get it back in this horizontal vehicular combat game. Armed with a machine gun, along with a ridiculous jump that almost flips the car backward, players must travel through five areas taking out enemy tanks, soldiers, pillboxes, etc. Gameplay is very dull – enemies almost always are stationary or travel in a straight line firing, with the only real challenge coming in the form of not having sufficient heads-up to avoid enemies or not enough time to speed up to get over some jumping hazards (rocks, water, etc.). There's not much in terms of variety in destroying/avoiding enemies, since they are very similar from one level to the next. A singular power-up will sometimes drop in a parachute; it's a threeway spreadshot that lasts a short time or until a lost life if a second one is captured. There are no other frills to be found – not even enemy bosses at the end of the relatively short levels. Unlimited continues ensure completion of the game, but the dullness may have you turning it off long before recovering the jet.

Reflections: *BreakThru* was a game that I played as a child only because a friend let me borrow it for a time. I enjoyed the game for what it was, but looking back I may have been fooling myself, because any new game was played like it was the last game you'd ever lay your hands on. Still, I enjoyed running over the enemy soldiers when I could.

At the end of the game, after capturing the fighter jet, it takes off and the player is witness to a comically long scene of the plane passing from the left side to the right until it flies off screen. It was as if Data East had discovered how to code that movement the week before, and wanted to wow the audience by having the effect linger for about 20 seconds longer than it should have. – PC





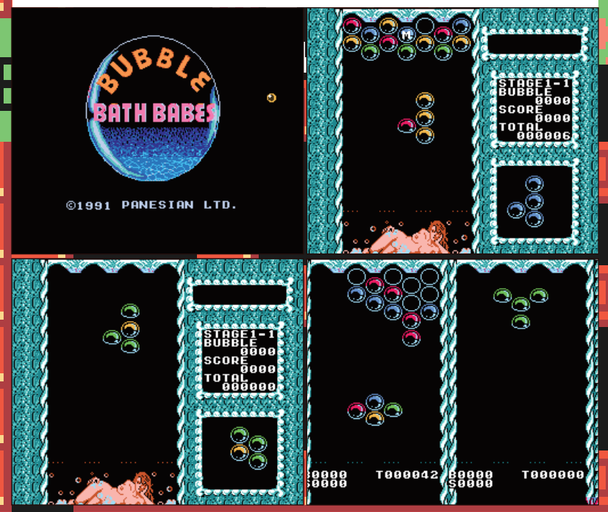


Bubble Bath Babes

Genre: Puzzle
Release Date: 1991
Developer: Computer & Entertainment
Publisher: Panesian
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Very Rare
★★⋆

This adult-themed puzzle game tasks the player to match up similarly colored bubbles. In a rectangular tank (with a nude woman lounging on the bottom), shapes of four bubbles containing up to four different colors (green, blue, red, and gold) will rise to the top. Players can maneuver the bubbles and also flip the shape (and colors) horizontally with B and vertically with A. The shapes will collect and fill in when they reach the other bubbles at the top. When four of the same colored bubbles connect, they will disappear, and any bubbles beneath will move up in the stack, which can result in combo eliminations. The game ends when the bubbles collect to the bottom (limited continues are available). The flipping of the bubble patterns takes some getting used to, but after a while gets easier. What doesn't get easier, though, is finding places to put useless pieces, such as the Y shape with multiple colors, which unless a great opportunity is already there, can be difficult. The game showing you what the next piece will be can make things a little easier, however. The puzzle action is sound, but the room for error is very low, with little chance to recover if a few bubbles are misplaced. What can help out is a random glowing bubble piece, which will transform all the bubbles in its direct radius into the same color. There is also the "MAGIC" power-up. Randomly, some of the colored bubbles in a shape will contain one of the letters of the word "magic." If that bubble is eliminated, that letter fills up on the top right of the screen, and if "magic" is spelled out entirely, it will give the player the ability to eliminate a chunk of bubbles on the screen at any time by pressing B + DOWN to activate it. Two game modes are available. Mode A tasks the player to eliminate a certain number of bubbles to move on to the next stage, which will be more challenging due to the bubbles rising at a quicker pace. Every two levels a picture of a woman teasing the player with bubble innuendo is shown, and after six stages, the woman will be nude. The next stage will start the cycle again with a slower stage and a new woman. The more challenging mode B has the same overall structure, but the objective is to eliminate one letter bubble, which will already be in place, as well as other bubbles surrounding it. This unique spin on the puzzle genre does the best it can with the concept and even has a nice two-player mode. If you can look past the tacky nudity, there's a decent time to be had.

Reflections: The best Panesian release by a country mile (which isn't saying much), *Bubble Bath Babes* was altered/cleaned up and released by AVE as *Mermaids of Atlantis*. That version has more options but no female nudity, so play whichever one you prefer! – PC



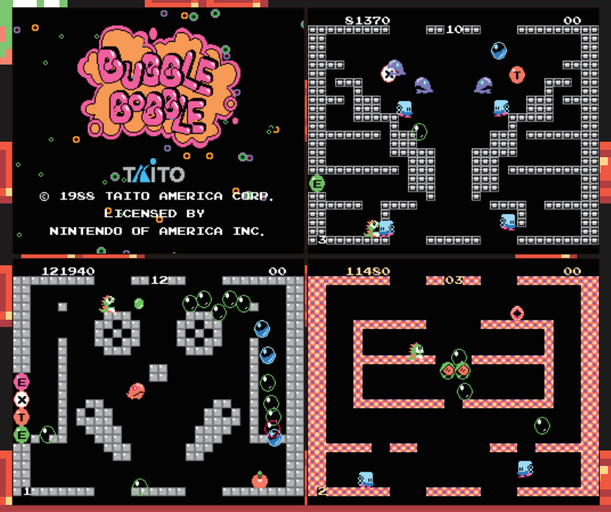
Bubble Bobble

Genre: Platformer
Release Date: Nov. 1988
Developer: Taito
Publisher: Taito
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★⋆

This charming game has the player(s) take control of little dinosaurs who blow bubbles to trap enemies. Popping the bubbles by jumping/walking into them defeats the foes inside. The main characters are Bub and Bob, who must not only rescue their girlfriends, but must also restore themselves to human form by travelling through the Cave of Monsters. The single screen levels consist of enemies who will walk around the screen's platforms. The player must trap them all in bubbles and and pop them to advance. Defeated foes drop candy, martinis, gems, and all sorts of point-giving items not fit for a dinosaur. Stages quickly get more difficult and puzzle-like in nature as players must master different techniques, such as climbing bubbles to advance vertically up or wiping out chains of enemies. The whole affair is fast-paced, frantic, and fun from the start, and luckily the controls are snappy and responsive. Many platforms can be jumped through, but in later levels solid ones will create tricky situations that must be navigated to get that one last elusive baddie, like getting inside of tight spaces to get at an enemy without being killed. The game has many secret warps, hidden bonus levels, and even different endings, the best of which can only be obtained by completing the game in the incredibly fun, cooperative, two-player mode. The only tune in the game is thankfully fun and catchy and will definitely get stuck in players' heads for days. This is a fantastic game for wasting a rainy afternoon with a friend.

Reflections: One of my better video game achievements was getting the true ending in this with a buddy of mine three days before I moved from Buffalo to San Diego. It took a case of beer, about four hours, and a lot of continues, but no cheats or funny business. It was an absolute blast. – IF

The looping music track usually dissolves my mind into putty after a while, reducing me to a giddy zombie. I'm not saying it's a good thing to go insane, but if I had to, I'd prefer doing it while the *Bubble Bobble* soundtrack ran laps in my head. – PC



Bubble Bobble Part 2

Genre: Platformer
Release Date: Aug. 1993
Developer: Taito
Publisher: Taito
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Rare
★★★★

Bub and Bob are once again transformed into adorable bubble-blowing dragons in this sequel with both positive and negative changes. Players are tasked with jumping around single screen platforming stages of increasing complexity while blowing bubbles to capture enemies. Bubbled enemies must then be popped, at which point they will transform from adorable evil into delicious snacks, likes shaved ice and fruits, for our dinosaur heroes to scoop up for points. Clearing all enemies proceeds to the next level. Enemies range from simple walking nuisances that are easily caught and dispatched, to much trickier enemies that fly in unpredictable ways, can fire their hats as weapons, or move at speeds that can really trip up the players. Occasional larger enemies, such as a fire pit, will act as bigger obstacles in a level, and must be dealt with by using repeated bubble shots to eliminate them, as opposed to the traditional bubble capture method. The difficulty of the levels ramps up significantly quickly, which isn't a bad thing necessarily, but may throw off those charmed by the game's cute exterior. Graphics are fantastic with cute, chunky, colorful, and well-animated characters, and the game has a nice variety of normal and fantastical backgrounds to keep the visuals fresh. While everything looks and plays great, a few omissions are certainly a bummer. Instead of a more traditional password save, what is on offer here are limited lives and limited continues, which makes practicing and progressing a far larger chore than it should. These gripes aside, this is a fine piece of frantic arcade eye candy.

Reflections: While not truly a part of the *Bubble Bobble* story, this was an excellent new set of levels in a very sharp package for fans of the original. Unfortunately, this title came out extremely late into the system's lifespan, meaning no one really bought it, so it has become one of the harder NES games to find today. – IF

Bucky O'Hare

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Jan. 1992
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Konami
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★

The titular buck-toothed space captain and his crew continue their battle against the evil Toad Empire in this action-packed platformer based on the comic book and cartoon series. But things aren't looking good for the heroes! Bucky's comrades have been kidnapped by those amphibious bullies, and the valiant protagonist must set out to rescue them. His companions are imprisoned on four perilous planets, but once one of Bucky's friends has been saved, they'll be able to join the fight! Switching between five playable characters on the fly is loads of fun, as each member of Bucky's crew has their own unique strengths and abilities. Everybody's favorite green rabbit has a gift for jumping high. Blinky the android can fly for short bursts, and first mate Jenny shoots a helpful homing projectile. Dead-Eye Duck skillfully scales walls, and the human boy, Willy DuWitt, packs a powerful laser gun. Bucky and his team must brave pits of fiery lava, slippery slopes of jagged ice, and other hostile environments. Baddies such as Guardroids and infinite platoons of Storm Toad Troopers will try to put an end to Bucky's heroism, and prototypical platforming perils, like instant death spikes and collapsing platforms, really intensify the challenge. Fortunately, the levels are peppered with power-ups and free lives, and the long-eared leading man and his pals will certainly appreciate those unlimited continues! Inventive boss battles, pulse-pounding shooter segments, and a couple of clever plot twists help maximize the fun. The catchy soundtrack keeps things hoppin', and the graphics are polished. The gameplay feels fluid, and the difficulty is high enough to keep a good player engaged without causing excessive levels of aggravation. With some skill and maybe a little luck, the only animals croaking here should be the Toads!

Reflections: This is an awesome game, but I never understood the appeal of Bucky O'Hare as a character. An awkward, anthropomorphic green rabbit wearing a dopey expression and a red marching band costume? WITH epaulets!? How uncool can one comic book hero possibly get? But he does have some pretty awesome pals. Take Dead-Eye Duck for example - a battle-hardened space pirate with an eye patch and four arms wielding four laser blasters! WHY is the goofy-looking bunny wearing yellow rain boots the front man of this franchise?! Decidedly not cool. I mean, at least lose the epaulets, Bucky. And the boots. -DM

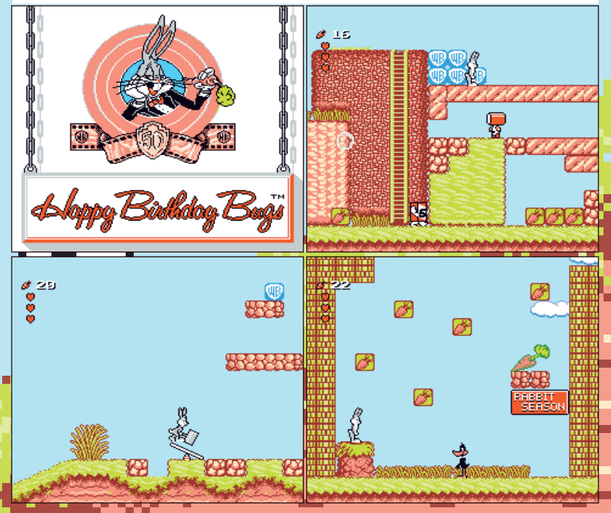
The Bugs Bunny Birthday Blowout

***The Bugs Bunny Blowout** (PAL)*
Genre: Platformer
Release Date: Sept. 1990
Developer: Kemco
Publisher: Kemco
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⋆

Bugs Bunny must make it to his birthday party by traveling through six platforming worlds. Armed with a mallet to fend off simplistic cartoon-like enemies, Bugs must traverse through levels while collecting carrots, which when collected will turn into "WB" platform blocks which can be used to jump off of. Other stage accoutrements include moving platforms, disappearing platforms, crumbling blocks, ladders, teeter-totters, etc. Most levels contain a system of several pipes/jars/holes that can be jumped into which act as transportation hubs via single screen transition bridges to travel to other parts of the stage. The ends of the stages consist of Bugs either trying to avoid Daffy Duck and grab a giant carrot, or defeating cartoon enemies like Elmer Fudd, Yosemite Sam, and even Tweety Bird. At the end of the levels, the carrots collected are cashed in for a chance to win extra lives via a random bingo-like game. The issue with the title is not with the gameplay, which is overall okay, nor with the decent controls (some hit detection issues with the mallet), but rather the repetitive nature of the levels. While the game is competently made, there's nothing truly imaginative involved in the level and character designs to entice players to continue onward, which may prevent most from ever getting to celebrate Bugs' birthday.

Reflections: Who doesn't love Bugs Bunny? He is the iconic wisecracker, always getting the best of those around him, using devilish wit and wile to make his enemies fail or even harm themselves. This title commemorated the 50th anniversary of Bugs Bunny appearing in short films, originally in movie theaters. Back then, buying a matinee movie ticket would get you access to a news reel, an animated short, a film short, and then a feature length film (I wasn't there, but I've heard it countless times from older relatives).

This title has "average" written all over its face. It's not like Kemco didn't try – I think they simply were handcuffed, maybe by design or hardware limitations. I only am saying that due to the fact that when more sprites and objects appear on screen, the movement of Bugs is no longer smooth but rather slightly jittery, not unlike Porky Pig trying to say "she sells seashells by the seashore." – PC

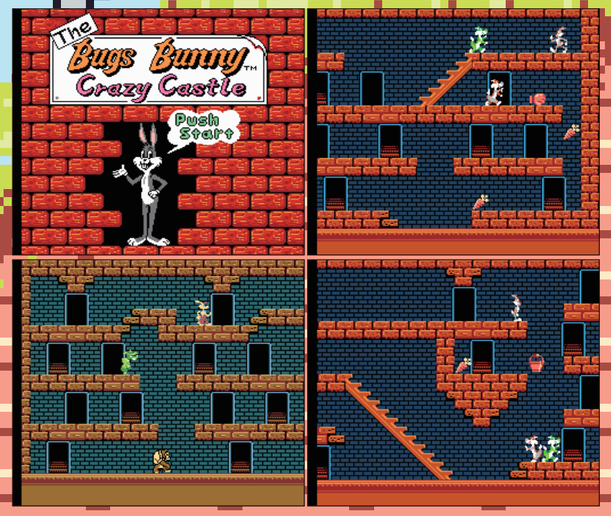


The Bugs Bunny Crazy Castle

Genre: Puzzle, Action
Release Date: Aug. 1989
Developer: Kemco
Publisher: Kemco
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⋆

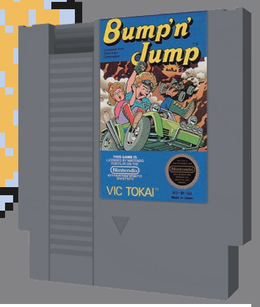
In this puzzle game, Bugs Bunny must collect all the carrots in each room while avoiding enemies. Players will traverse multiple levels in each scrolling room via stairs, pipes that can be entered above/below, and doorways which lead up/down to a connecting open doorway. The structure and challenge of the gameplay lies in being careful in avoiding the enemies: Yosemite Sam, Daffy Duck, Wile E. Coyote, and Sylvester the Cat. Bugs is not equipped with any default weapons nor even a jump. Planning and thinking ahead, waiting patiently for enemies to pass, and maneuvering around them with pinpoint precision and timing is key to collecting all the carrots safely in these cleverly designed stages. The level design is creative, and just when you think you're understanding the game and have it down pat, the next level throws you a curve. A limited number of usable weapons can help: a one-time use projectile punching glove, and items such as a weight or box that can be pushed into or on top of enemies. In some stages, being able to reach all the carrots to move on will appear all too easy, while in others a lot of trial-and-error and strategy will be needed to succeed. While controls are not perfect (reversing your path while on stairs can be tricky), all in all it's a well-put-together and enjoyable arcade-style experience, with a nice and simple password system in place to continue your crazy castle progress.

Reflections: This was originally a Roger Rabbit game on the Famicom, with enemy weasels from the film chasing the wacky cartoon hero around. Kemco would repeat this licensed property swap again with *Snoopy's Silly Sports Spectacular!* All that aside, this is a fine title, and did well enough to get a few sequels on the Game Boy and Game Boy Color handheld systems. – PC



Bump'n' Jump

Genre: Racing
Release Date: Dec. 1988
Developer: Data East
Portd by: Sakata SAS
Publisher: Vic Tokai
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★



In this overhead vertical racing game, players will have to speed through four districts and 16 courses to rescue their girlfriend. From a bird's-eye view, players drive their red buggy up the road and can also jump if they are driving at least 150 km/hour. The goal is to not crash or be destroyed by other cars, who will try and bump you into the side of the road. Players can bump back to try and shove them off the road and destroy them for points. Trucks must also be watched out for, as they cannot be bumped and drop sand, cement (which will destroy your car), or an oil slick. Every now and then, they'll also drop an invaluable extra life that can be picked up. Both types of enemies can be jumped on to eliminate them. Gameplay is frantic and difficult, as players have to constantly be wary of multiple enemies while avoiding hazards in the road and navigating the trademark long jumps in the game. During races, a flashing exclamation point will let the player know that a jump is needed, usually over a large body of water. Some jumps are tough to make, as they require either being at top speed when jumping or jumping a second time on a smaller patch of road to complete. In the middle of all this action, the player's constantly draining "P" meter has to be minded, since if it drains to zero, the player will be a sitting duck without the ability to jump. Picking up power barrels will keep the meter filled, but getting those barrels can be tough due to all the jumping the player does. Some nice tunes help keep the experience cheerful while players cause lots of accidents. It's very challenging, sometimes too much so, but for a player looking for a fun, polished, arcadey racing experience, they wouldn't have it any other way.

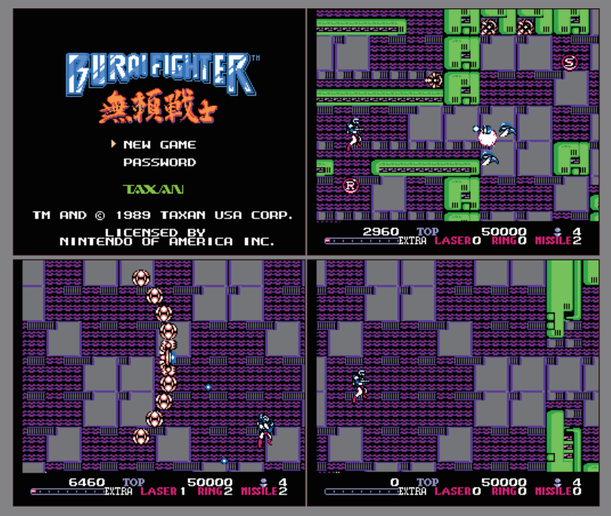
Reflections: Be on the lookout for the somewhat disturbing 50-ft woman who greets you in the road at the end of some of the courses. Mutation? Strange developer fetish? We'll never know. *Bump'n' Jump* represents the quintessential arcade experience. It's simple in concept and seems as easy at first, but then by the third stage you're getting owned left and right and wondering why you didn't just play skee ball instead. It's almost as if arcade game developers wanted to lure you in, let you have fun for a minute, and then quickly take your lives, forcing you to spend another quarter on the machine. Nah, they would never do that. – PC

Burai Fighter

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Mar. 1990
Developer: KID
Publisher: Taxan
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

This interesting and technically refined shooter features our jet-pack hero out to stop the evil Burai cyborgs. Several levels scroll horizontally/vertically on the way to defeating the nicely designed bosses, and two levels are overhead, free-roaming ones where the goal is to locate and destroy a base. Players can shoot in any of the eight directions and can hold that shooting position while moving around by holding the B button. This is extremely useful and a reflection of the spot-on controls. The weapon power-up system consists of collecting orbs to strengthen one of three different types: missile, ring and laser. Players can switch between weapons by grabbing their corresponding orbs, and each of the three weapons will max out their strength at the tenth orb obtained for them. There's also a secondary cobalt bomb weapon that can be powered up by collecting red orbs. If the bomb meter is maxed out, the player will receive an extra life. These lives are very helpful since the amount of enemies/obstacles and enemy fire on screen can be plentiful, making the one-hit deaths occur more frequently than not. Thankfully, continuing via a password system alleviates the pain a tad. While the enemies themselves may not be the most interesting, they come quickly and often, which makes blasting them via the great controls a better shooter experience than you might think on the surface.

Reflections: I usually shy away from multidirectional shooters, but if a nice strafing control scheme is put in place (as was done here), it's usually a blast (pun semi-intended). Some of the extremely well-named enemies in this game include such creative choices as Cannonhead, Twinkletoes, Freakfly, Badbug, and Fatso. Some literary wiz at Taxan must have received a well-earned bonus. – PC



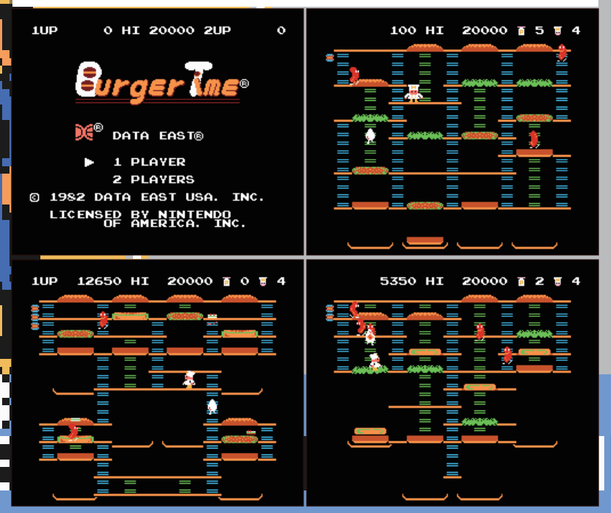
BurgerTime

Genre: Action, Puzzle
Release Date: May 1987
Developer: Data East
Ported by: Sakata SAS
Publisher: Data East
Players: 1–2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⋆

Step into the no-slip kitchen clogs of Peter Pepper in this port of an arcade classic. The goal is to guide the chef through a single-screen maze of ladders and platforms strewn with traditional hamburger ingredients, all while avoiding a parade of evil hot dogs, eggs, and other menacing food critters. The levels are scattered with buns, lettuce, patties, and other burger fixings, while serving trays lie in a row at the bottom of the screen. As players walk over the various toppings, they fall to a lower level. The toppings must continue to be pushed to lower levels until they are assembled completely in their trays. Once all the burgers are made, it's on to the next level with a trickier layout. Enemies are fast and aggressive, but can be stopped in a couple of ways. The first line of defense is a limited arsenal of ground pepper that can be thrown in the face of enemies, causing them to freeze temporarily. The other way enemies can be dispatched is a bit trickier. Enemies can be made to follow Peter Pepper in a line by navigating the ladders and platforms in a snake-like pattern. If these enemies pursue him across a burger fixing, they will drop with it and be eliminated. Falling burger fixings can also crush enemies beneath. The player will be rewarded with far more points and an emptier screen until the evil food stuffs respawn, in exchange for the more dangerous feat. The graphics are pretty great for the time, with funny-looking enemies and easily distinguishable burger ingredients, making it fun to complete the burgers. The strategy employed here makes this a fair bit different from other maze games, and the great theme and implementation of it make this a fun, but difficult game.

Reflections: *BurgerTime* is a foodborne illness nightmare. Meat lies out on dirty girders waiting to be walked on by a chef who is routinely getting roughed up by eggs. That's cross contamination. Any health inspector who sees that activity is going to levy some serious fines. – IF

A sequel to this game, *Diner*, was put out on the Intellivision system in 1987, late in that system's lifespan. It is very hard to come by. I own a copy complete in box, and I treat it like the rest of my Intellivision game collection – ignored in a box somewhere in my garage. – PC



Cabal

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: June 1990
Developer: TAD
Ported by: Rare
Publisher: Milton Bradley
Players: 1–2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⋆

In this shooter, gameplay consists of controlling a soldier from a third-person perspective behind the character. On fixed single-screen stages, players control the characters' movements from left to right, and can aim their unlimited machine gun fire on the screen via a crosshair target to take out enemy soldiers and vehicles. Firing will freeze the player, thus allowing movement of the crosshairs around the screen. Besides the machine gun, a limited number of grenades can be obtained and thrown by tapping the A button. Multiple enemy bullets and grenades will come at the player(s) all at once, and they can be countered by either moving behind walls and objects that provide cover (which can be destroyed), or by using the B button to dash, jump and roll, or duck and roll to avoid attacks. Players will have to balance avoidance and attacking at the same time in order to survive and take out the required number of enemies on each level. This precarious balance based upon constant quick decision-making is what provides the game with its style and challenge. While the variety of enemies and combat doesn't really change in the relatively short game, its originality and decent presentation make it worth playing. And if the challenge seems too much to handle, a two-player simultaneous mode culled from the arcade version will even the odds a bit more.

Reflections: *Cabal* pioneered the third-person perspective fixed shooter sub-genre, from which later games like *Wild Guns* would draw their inspiration. I remember playing the arcade cabinet of *Cabal* at a local pizzeria. With greasy pizza hands I maneuvered that cabinet's trackball around and generally got my ass kicked. When the NES version was purchased for me from a toy liquidation outlet store in Pennsylvania, I got the chance to have my revenge via a controller, cleaner hands, and without wasting multiple quarters. However, I did miss having a slice or two at my side.

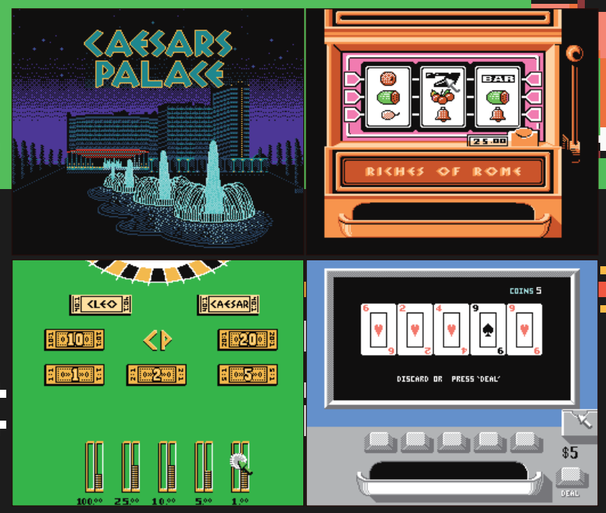
One of the most insane events in an NES game occurs when completing a stage. After your acts of carnage end, bouncy, cute music plays while your rampaging soldier happily throws his arms in the air and prances down the road, dancing over the broken and bloody bodies he just killed. It's bat-shit crazy to behold. – PC

Caesars Palace

Genre: Gambling
Release Date: Dec. 1992
Developer: Realtime Associates
Publisher: Virgin Games
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⋆

In this gambling title, players are given $1,000 in chips at the Caesars Palace casino and may play several different table games or slot machines in any order they wish to hopefully win more money. Using a cursor, players can move around an overhead map of the casino floor to select and play Blackjack, Roulette, Big Six Money Wheel, Video Poker, and two different types of slot machines: the Riches of Rome and Magnificent Sevens. The various rules apply to each game. Players can bet very little or a lot, depending on their preference. Each game is represented and operates authentically, with the odds and payouts based upon their real-life counterparts. If players want to try a different game, they can simply press Select to back out to the overhead view. There's no real goal to the game. However, the player can cash out their chips at any time at the cashier. Depending on how much the player has accumulated, they will leave the casino in anything from a bus to a limousine or sports car. For a gambling simulation, it may get the job done, but there are no frills or semblance of any extras to be seen, save for being able to click on the bathroom door to take a break.

Reflections: The closest experience to the Caesar's Palace casino I had as a child was watching the daytime television game show that was taped there – *Caesar's Challenge*, hosted by Ahmad Rashad. It was a simple word scramble game where contestants answered trivia questions to select one letter at a time to unscramble in a word, and then were given a chance to guess the word, based upon a category clue. It's a much more memorable experience than this video game for certain, along with Caesars Palace being the spot of the terrible Wrestlemania IX and Evel Knievel's disastrous motorcycle stunt jump attempt. Now that I think about it more, Caesars Palace is just a monument to underperforming and broken dreams. – PC



California Games

Genre: Sports
Release Date: June 1989
Developer: Epyx
Ported by: Rare
Publisher: Milton Bradley
Players: 1–8
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

This seasonal sports title features six events that may be competed in by up to eight players. Options include practicing events, competing in individual events, or competing in all. After inputting a name and choosing a team sponsor, play begins. Half Pipe has the player try one of three skateboarding tricks, including aerial turns, kick turns, and hand plants. The controls are a bit too finicky and require very precise presses or else the tricks fail. Foot Bag has the player timing hits of the footbag by either hitting it with the head, knee, or foot of the character on screen. This functions well, and it's fun to do spinning tricks or hit passing seagulls for points. Surfing has the player doing turns, jumps, and "riding the tube." It controls fine, but not having feedback for point scoring during play is a let down. Rollerskating is a side-scrolling affair where the player can skate, jump, and do spin jumps off ramps while avoiding cracks and other objects that can wipe out the player. It's an okay experience, with very touchy hits. The worst event is probably BMX Bike Racing, which has the player traveling along dirt paths and hills while attempting to avoid obstacles. The hit detection makes it very difficult to get far, and pulling off all but one of the four jump tricks is tough. Finally, Flying Disk is simple and functional; it involves throwing one via meter and then maneuvering a second character to run and attempt to catch it, with more points awarded for a jumping catch. The events all look pretty good, showing off California settings and characters that seem to fit right in. There's even some nice California lingo thrown in to really sell the setting. The gameplay and fun factor, though, is a very mixed bag, with some events genuinely fun, and others frustrating to even attempt. It's a nice change of pace for a sports game and a decent distraction for a short time, but it's lacking a bit of polish overall.

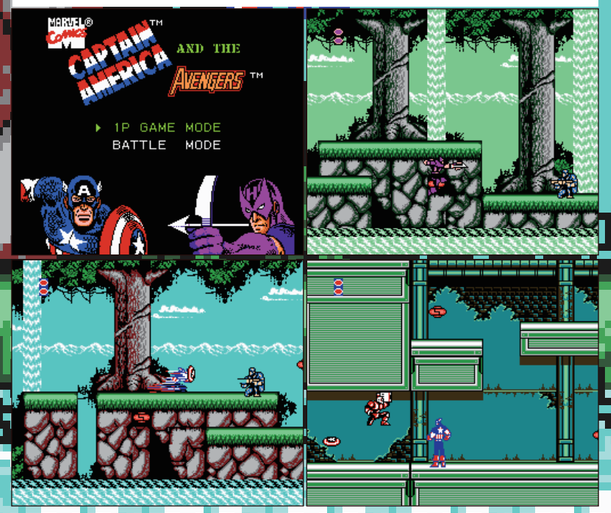
Reflections: This was a spinoff of sorts from Epyx, who also developed *Winter Games*, *World Games*, and *Summer Games* for computers. This also was the pack-in game for the Atari Lynx handheld system. Some ports of the game have hang-gliding. Can I finally say "Frisbee" and "Hackey Sack" here instead of "flying disc" and "foot bag"? I mean, who says "petroleum jelly" or "adhesive bandage"? As a San Diego resident, I can safely say that I've rarely witnessed Frisbee or Hackey Sack being played at the beach, but then again, I usually stay out of the sun so I don't burn. In college, though, they were all the rage, and I even remember kids in New Jersey playing Hackey Sack in school (I was terrible at it). Hmmm, was this all because of the heavy influence *California Games* had on children nationwide?! – PC

Captain America and the Avengers

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Dec. 1991
Developer: Data East
Publisher: Data East
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

Captain America and Hawkeye set out to rescue Avengers members Vision and Iron Man from the Mandarin. Play begins with an overhead map view of the United States, with about 20 stage locations that can be traveled between. Two icons represent Hawkeye and Captain America separately. You may move them independently and play, but if you move both to the same location the icon will change to an "A," and you can then move and play both on the same stage (which is preferable). Stages consist of traversing left to right and also vertically in order to find a crystal to unlock the barrier to the door that ends the level and allow the player to move forward on the map screen. Hawkeye uses a bow and arrow that can be shot straight, straight up, or diagonally up. Captain America is slightly stronger and can throw his shield, do a shield dash, do a downward shield strike, and can grab onto and jump off of pipes and certain platforms to reach areas Hawkeye cannot. Both have independent health bars and can be switched between one other during stages if together. Enemies consist mainly of standard soldiers firing guns and rocket launchers, although once in a while players will encounter boss battles with villains like Ultron or Crossbones. The standard enemies will increase in number and damage output as the levels progress, but players can upgrade attack strength and increase health bar length by collecting power stones that are inside breakable pods throughout the levels. If Cap or Hawkeye dies, the player will have to backtrack and replay a few levels in order to save them. Stages consist of a handful of types – forest, base, city, and construction site. Some are reused with minor changes and a palette swap for the background. Overall, the action is satisfying, although battling the same enemies again and again with little change can get stale. Also, having no additional power-ups or any other Avengers, save for Wasp showing up for advice, seems like a wasted opportunity. Graphics and music are solid, and the sound effects are particularly well done. A two-player battle mode is tacked on as a small bonus. There's some superhero fun to be had, even if the variety of experiences isn't the greatest.

Reflections: No, this is not a port of the excellent four-player arcade beat 'em up of the same name, which was released on the Genesis and SNES. That game had great voice samples, appropriately cheesy dialog, and lots of fast-paced action. It also had the ability to use Iron Man and Vision, which the NES version did not provide. Being a big Captain America fan, I would have at least rented this game as a child, had I known about it. Maybe I skipped over the Pak Watch section that month in *Nintendo Power*? – PC



Captain Comic: The Adventure

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: 1989
Developer: Michael Denio
Publisher: Color Dreams
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★

The Comic just flew in, and boy, are his arms tired! Meet Captain Comic, valiant adventurer and galactic hero! (No, he's not a stand-up comedian!) Garbed in his orange Mark VII space suit and equipped with his Blastola assault weapon, the intrepid protagonist sets out on his mission to recover the ancient treasures of Osmic, which have been stolen by some nameless villain. As the game begins, the futuristic space man appears before an ancient stone castle (just wait, it gets weirder) and sets off on his quest across the perilous planet of Tambi. Run, jump, and shoot in this peculiar platformer, obliterating enemies and gathering power-ups along the way. A motley variety of levels immerses the captain in several different genres. Journey through a torch-lit cavern, a labyrinthine space station, and a sprawling medieval castle as you search high and low for the priceless treasures. Beelunkers, Smoodgeons, and scores of other creatively named foes plot your annihilation as you battle your way across this hostile world. The captain's shield energy loses power with each hit, so finding restorative Shield Packs is essential to survival. In addition, uncovering Shield of Life power-ups grants extra lives, and gathering Blastola Cola icons increases the effectiveness of Captain Comic's weapon. Other helpful items include Boots that allow the hero to jump higher and a Wand that provides short-range teleportation powers. The public domain music selections are an odd fit for this game, and the grating sound effects for both shooting and jumping are sure to make even the most stoic of heroes slap their hands over their ears in agony! The graphics fall somewhere between primitive and kinda bad. There's a good deal of exploration and backtracking required to locate the various items and power-ups, and getting lost is almost inevitable. By the way, the precious treasures being sought by the courageous captain are a lousy crown, random gems, and some coins. Like this game as a whole, booooooooring.

Reflections: WAIT a second... How did this mediocre, under-performing space hero possibly get promoted to the rank of captain?! He can only shoot in one direction, he doesn't crouch, and he can't jump without emitting a high-pitched squeak. He uses a magic wand that looks like it was borrowed from a storybook fairy, and his blaster is powered by soda pop! This guy's most fearsome enemies are birds that can barely fly, adorable inchworms, creatures made from goat cheese, and actual chunks of pollen! Captain Comic. CAPTAIN Comic? Seriously?! I guess "Cadet Comic" or "Private Second Class Comic" just didn't have the same oomph! – DM

Captain Planet and the Planeteers

Genre: Shooter, Action
Release Date: Sept. 1991
Developer: Chris Gray Enterprises
Publisher: Mindscape
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⋆

Take on eco-terrorists set on polluting the Earth in this hybrid shooter/action game based on the animated series. The five game levels are split between two game modes: a horizontal shooter section where the player takes control of a jet, helicopter, or sub, and a free-roaming action section where players control the heroic Captain Planet. The shooter sections consist of the player's craft armed with five different elemental weapons that can be switched via the START button: fire (fireballs), water (wave projectile), earth (rock bombs), wind (circular shield), and heart (assists/enlists help from animals). The ship is supplied with a "Planet Power" meter that depletes upon use of these weapons, but one of the several available power-up items will replenish it. Avoiding one-hit deaths is difficult, even with the ability to turn around with the B button. These shooter areas don't just include combat but also mini-game challenges, such as running down a truck before it pollutes the water or rescuing elephants. The issue is that these challenges are obtuse and can be overly difficult, even with the manual instructing you how to get through them. The Captain Planet sections consist of the player flying around a maze-like area in any direction while punching enemies and collecting power-ups. Thankfully, there is a life meter in this game mode, but it doesn't help with the many traps that are just about one-touch deaths, nor does it make finding and getting to the enemy boss battles (also obtuse and difficult) and completing them that much easier. The annoyance here is having to switch the Captain to an elemental power to get past many barriers/traps, which will deplete the energy bar very quickly. While boasting some innovative gameplay ideas and good graphics and presentation, the high challenge and sections that leave almost no room for error are major turn-offs.

Reflections: In the early '90s the pro-environmental message was fairly new and fresh, but the *Captain Planet* cartoon still never appealed to me. What probably turned me off were the five annoying kids with their dumb cargo vests who were given insane rings of power for no good reason. The fact that these kids were too stupid to realize that they should combine their powers at the beginning of the episode to form Captain Planet instead of getting their asses kicked for 20 minutes first was irrational, even to a young Pat. One of the enemies on the show was named Duke Nukem. Apogee, who had their 2D *Duke Nukem* run and gun shooter series on the PC at the time, changed their hero's name for a time to Duke Nukum when they were made aware of the show's villain. Apogee changed the name back to Duke Nukem when they discovered the name was not trademarked. Phew! What an exciting story! Not nap-worthy at all! – PC

Captain Skyhawk

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: June 1990
Developer: Rare
Publisher: Milton Bradley
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★⋆

Players pilot an F-14 style fighter jet to save the Earth from aliens in this action-packed shooter. Gameplay consists of two alternating modes: an overhead isometric perspective and a third-person behind-the-plane view. The isometric mode has the player firing guns at enemies and air-to-ground missiles at ground targets while avoiding missiles and the terrain, all of which will destroy the plane in a single hit. In these levels, the player must accomplish tasks of either dropping off supplies onto ground targets or defeating an enemy base (which are all about the same design). The high degree of difficulty here lies in avoiding the many incoming shots as well as the terrain, which will result in players having to strafe constantly, sometimes wildly. The third-person perspective mode fares a bit better, although taking out enemy jets with machine guns and missiles while avoiding fire is too simplistic compared to the isometric levels, creating a difficulty imbalance. In between these modes is a required space docking mini-game which feels extraneous by the third time it shows up. The graphics (especially in the overhead mode) are impressive enough, and the controls are smooth in movement and taking out enemies. Even with some good ideas on display, such as buying armaments in between rounds and being able to choose alternate routes on the overhead levels, the fun experience never quite reaches its full potential.

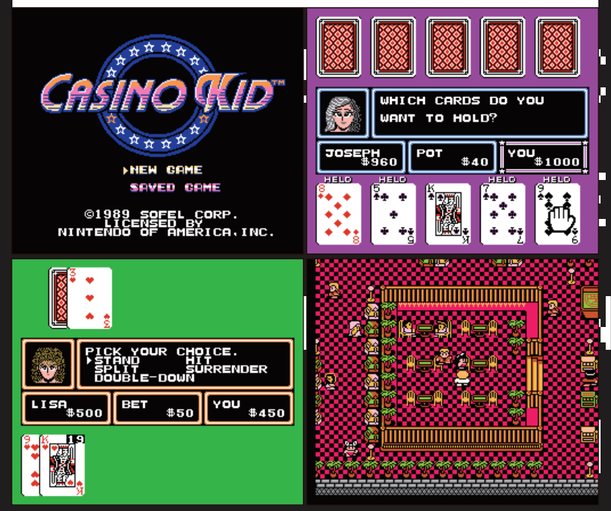
Reflections: *Captain Skyhawk* is one of the most common third-party titles on the NES largely due to the coverage in magazines, but more importantly due to the ton of television ads that Milton Bradley bought to promote it. I recall seeing its commercial many, many a time during Disney Afternoon cartoon blocks. This led to me renting the game a few times as a child and even borrowing it from a friend. I could never get past the third level, and overthought the difficulty on the unnecessary space docking portions. Seriously, those geniuses could design a fighter jet that can fly through space but not a space station with a docking bay that doesn't unnecessarily rotate? Or how about a tractor beam? I've never seen the USS Enterprise from *Star Trek* do a wacky barrel roll when docking, but then again I've yet to see the remastered HD version of the original series. – PC

Casino Kid

Genre: Gambling, Strategy
Release Date: Oct. 1989
Developer: SOFEL
Publisher: SOFEL
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

This gambling game takes place in a casino, where the goal is to defeat all the blackjack dealers and poker players before facing the King of Casino. Players are given $500 to start and must walk around the casino floor in an overhead view and talk to various people who will inform the player where certain opponents are, give tips about poker players, or say humorous/nonsensical things. Blackjack dealers will be at their tables while poker opponents will be random people around the casino floor who must be found – a tedious element seemingly meant to extend the game. There are eight opponents for each card game that must be defeated in order before facing the King at poker, although players can alternate between the two games if they wish. The blackjack game is the classic version, allowing hitting, standing, splits, double downs, and insurance. Smart play is necessary to make money and progress, but even still, bankrupting the dealer can take a long time unless they agree to the option to bet all their money, which only happens after a while. More entertaining is the five-card draw poker game, which allows betting, raising, and reraising both before and after drawing cards to create the best poker hand. This mode has the opponent saying things and having facial expressions that may or may not clue the player in on their hand strength. After a while and on the losing side, the poker opponents will want to bet all their remaining money, which can hopefully end the game. The experience is very drawn out, and there's little overall strategy involved, save for deciding to face several poker or blackjack opponents in a row, or alternating. There's also some nonrandomness involved in card dealings, it seems. It doesn't help that the music track that loops is 12 seconds long, nor that placing bets and drawing cards is a little slower than it should be. The gambling experience offered is fine, but if that's all you're after, this isn't the best game to get it.

Reflections: The player's character looks like Luke Skywalker who got lost in a Tatooine casino run by Jabba the Hutt. The structure of the game is so forced and has no other diversions, like random people offering anything interesting or being able to play one of the slot machines on the floor. This title is more of a wasted opportunity, especially given the pretty good graphics on display. – PC

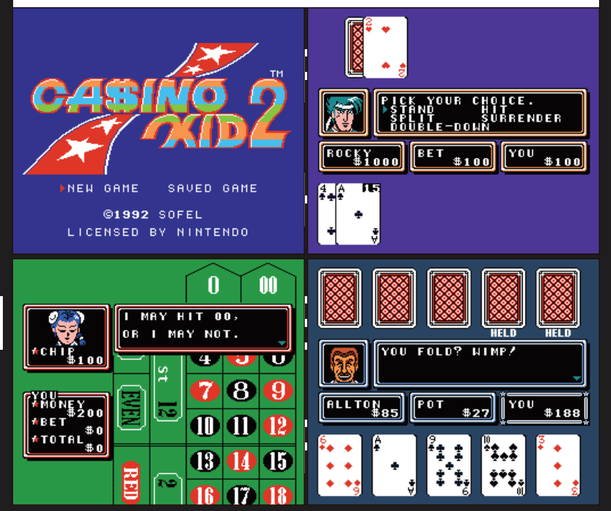


Casino Kid II

Genre: Gambling, Strategy
Release Date: Apr. 1993
Developer: SOFEL, EIM
Publisher: SOFEL
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Rare
★★★

One year later, the Casino Kid returns, this time to face international gamblers. Starting with $200, the player can choose one of nine opponents from a world map, three each for the games of blackjack, five-card draw poker, and roulette. Each opponent is one of three difficulty levels, with the hardest opponents only playable after defeating the easiest ones. After defeating all nine opponents, the player will then have to play all three games against the King of Casino in the finale. The blackjack game is the classic version, allowing hitting, standing, splits, double downs, and insurance. Smart play is necessary to make money and progress. However, there doesn't seem to be total randomness of the cards, but situational advantages. There is an option to end things quicker by betting all your money, which is helpful for eliminating opponents when you have a dominating money advantage. The five-card draw poker game allows betting, raising, and reraising both before and after drawing cards to create the best poker hand. This mode has the opponent stating phrases and conveying facial expressions that may or may not clue the player in on the strength of their poker hand. After a while and on the losing side, the poker players may want to bet all their money, which can hopefully end the game. The player may also ask to bet all their money and have the option selected. The roulette game has all the standard bets available – individual numbers, number blocks, betting black/red, etc. Players may bet up to five different bets before the wheel is spun. This mode also is not random, however, but patterns of what bets should be placed can be gleaned by the clues stated by the dealer. This is a streamlined and improved experience from the first game, with several music tracks instead of a single loop and nicer presentation overall. However, some may be turned off by the fact that the gameplay does not truly represent the casino gaming experience due to the non-randomness.

Reflections: These *Casino Kid* games are head-scratchers to me. Why would you play casino games that are not truly random but somewhat situational in nature? Roulette is a terrible game to have a money value objective due to the total randomness and the huge dealer advantage (it's one of the worst games to play at a casino). However, betraying the game and rigging it to coincide with dealer clues makes it somehow worse, as if both sides are in on the cheating. Now, I wish back in Atlantic City that the dealer would have tipped me off as to what number would come out, but then both my and the dealer's head would have ended up in a vice grip in a back room. – PC



Castelian

Genre: Platformer
Release Date: June 1991
Developer: Hewson Consultants
Ported by: Bits Studios
Publisher: Triffix Entertainment
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★⋆

The goal of this quirky platformer is to destroy a series of eight progressively more difficult towers by reaching the top in the time limit and leaving behind an explosive. Instead of wide, expansive levels, each tower is a very narrow, vertical climb. As you move left and right, a nice visual trick rotates the tower to bring new stairs and platforms into view as others fade away. Graphics are basic, but you can strangely choose to hear either the music or sound effects, but not both during play. Julius (or Pogo, depending on the version played) can jump and shoot a ball a small distance, but some enemies are invulnerable to the shots and must be avoided. Coming into contact with an enemy will result in Julius falling onto a lower tower level or into the water to lose a life. Julius can't jump very far, so the platforming becomes annoyingly precise very quickly. Besides standard platforming, the towers have doors in certain spots that will take the players beyond gaps to hard to reach areas, while elevator platforms can raise him to the next series of platforms. After each tower is conquered, a short side-scrolling bonus stage awaits where Julius can collect colored diamonds for points and extra lives. The game has an interesting concept but relies too heavily on traps that result in trial-and-error gameplay that becomes frustrating quickly. There's also no excuse for the A button to be handling both jumping and shooting while B isn't used at all. Combine these issues with repetitive gameplay and the cartridge becomes one not likely to reside in any NES for long.

Reflections: I'm a sucker for NES-era game soundtracks, and the main title theme for *Castelian* is a real banger. This is one of those games I throw in from time to time because I swear I'm going to love it if I give it one more try. It never works out. – IF

Cute, green, mutant pigs. Bouncy death balls... what could go wrong? This was originally released on multiple computer platforms as *Tower Toppler* or *Nebulus*, but NES hindsight tells us that it probably should have stayed there. – PC

Castle of Deceit

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: 1990
Developer: Bunch Games
Publisher: Bunch Games
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Rare
★

As Eebo the apprentice magician, the player must enter the Castle of Deceit to track down six interdimensional rune stones. What starts as an interesting premise transforms into a befuddling, bad gaming experience in an instant. The player has a simple wavy magic spell attack, and can jump and platform around. The object of each level is to find keys to access different rooms to reach and defeat the end bosses. These boss fights take place in a third-person shooter mode. The enemy design is poor, as most are uninteresting bugs or shapes that fly around. Unfortunately, the player's attack is inadequate to deal with some of them, and for some reason enemies will stick to Eebo and drain his energy when they come into contact with him. The floaty, loose controls are also inadequate to deal with the precarious platforming elements. Visually and musically, the game disappoints with simplistic graphics and a single, short mediocre music track. The only "deceit" that exists is when someone plays this game thinking it will be even remotely fun.

Reflections: The hits just keep on coming for Color Dreams... errr excuse me, Bunch Games. It's not like you're tricking anyone, Color Dreams, with your strange, baby blue cartridges. Then again, since unlicensed carts like these were mostly unavailable at mainstream retailers, I doubt more than 13 people purchased this anyway.

Is it a requirement for all wizards to dress like Merlin, with the long robes and cone hats? Is there a magician convention where important decisions like that are written down on some sort of Magic Constitution? What if I want to rock a leather jacket and jean shorts while casting my bad-ass spells? Is it like living in a condo unit and not being able to put a barbecue on my balcony? Would I face some sort of fine? – PC

Castle of Dragon

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: June 1990
Developer: Athena
Publisher: SETA
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★

This side-scrolling, fantasy themed hack 'n' slash game falls victim to frustrating and repetitive design. The armor-clad hero Geraden must make his way through a short map fighting monsters and bosses on the way to defeating the Dragon Master, Darklaza. The player is armed only with a sword slash and a jump, but they can acquire a number of fun power-ups such as a throwing knife, mace, and lightning sword. The problem is the actual action isn't any fun. Enemies are varied but lack any real patterns or AI. The best play strategy seems to be button mashing, which takes the fun out of fighting well-designed lizard men, harpies, and cool-looking knights. Boss battles are even worse, where unavoidable projectile sprays must be absorbed while rapidly hitting attack. Amplifying the problem is that one life is all a player gets, and no continues are to be found. Controls are a mixed bag, with the jumping and platforming segments being quite frustrating at times. The game does have a great sense of style to it, however, with the sprites of crumbling ruins and castle halls all creating a compelling world. It's too bad, as this title certainly could have been something better with very simple changes.

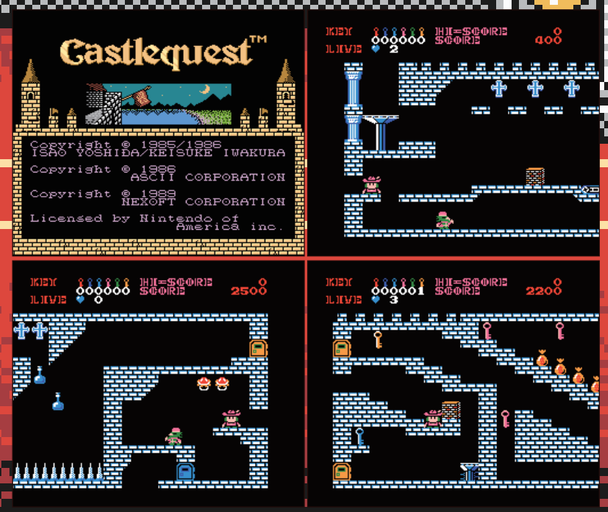
Reflections: I like what the game was trying to do. Battles are mostly fought one-on-one with a creature followed by a wave of bats or fireballs to dodge, and then another creature until the level ends. The zombies, lizardmen, and mages all add a nice variety to the look of the game. Unfortunately, getting in close and doing damage while they do the same until someone dies is all that lies underneath the surface of this title. – IF

Castlequest

Genre: Action-Platformer, Puzzle
Release Date: Sept. 1989
Developer: ASCII
Publisher: Nexoft
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

Armed with a tiny sword that takes out some enemies (and a floaty jump), Prince Rafael must rescue Princess Margarita by traversing a sprawling castle. Players will have to collect keys of six different colors to unlock the similarly colored doors to reach new areas of the single-screen roomed castle to proceed on. The challenge lies in avoiding traps such as spikes, navigating precarious situations like treadmills, moving platforms, elevators, etc., and solving simple puzzles like maneuvering objects in order to make jumps possible. Keys can only be used once, and they are somewhat limited. This makes the game more trial and error at points, since players can easily waste precious keys on doors leading nowhere useful without realizing it. Using the second controller, players can back out of opening doors if this occurs, or even sacrifice a life if they find themselves stuck in a room, which is not difficult to do. The frustration of the experience can be overwhelming at times, as it's simply not fun to find out that you've wasted a key and then have to replay the same rooms to try again. There are plenty of lives available (50 at the start) to help you out, but it's doubtful that you'll want to play through them all, lest you want to hear the same overly cheerful 20 second song loop dozens of times.

Reflections: Princess Margarita sounds like a cartoon character drawn inside a Chili's restaurant menu next to the chicken fajitas special. Prince Rafael certainly looks dapper in his pink hat and cape, though! The Famicom Disk System version of the game has a save feature, which is sorely missing on the NES. Also, an option to turn off the music would have been appreciated, as bleeding ears shouldn't be a core game feature. – PC



Castlevania

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: May 1987
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Konami
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★★

Simon Belmont must defeat the evil Dracula and other classic monsters such as the Mummy and Frankenstein's Monster in this tough action platformer. The player is equipped with a whip to take out various enemies such as skeletons, zombies, bats, and flying Medusa heads. Gameplay is difficult and the stiff controls contribute to this: the height and distance of jumps cannot be altered and the whip has a slight attack delay. Fortunately, several secondary weapons (B + UP) with available heart ammo in destructible candelabras can be obtained. These weapons (axe, throwing dagger, stopwatch, holy water bomb, cross boomerang) all have different strengths and uses. They can be very helpful, and players will learn which ones are more useful than others in certain spots in the game. The player has a health meter, but it drains quickly, and health power-ups, usually hidden in walls, are very scarce. The difficulty is unrelenting as the player is required to play almost perfectly in many areas or risk being knocked into a pit and facing instant death. Boss fights are either a quick war of attrition or very unfair, requiring the player to move and attack without much error as bosses drain the player's health very quickly. The graphics are only above average, but the music shines with complex, spooky, and memorable tracks in every level. It's a very satisfying game to play, but the extreme level of difficulty is a detriment that may turn off a good amount of players.

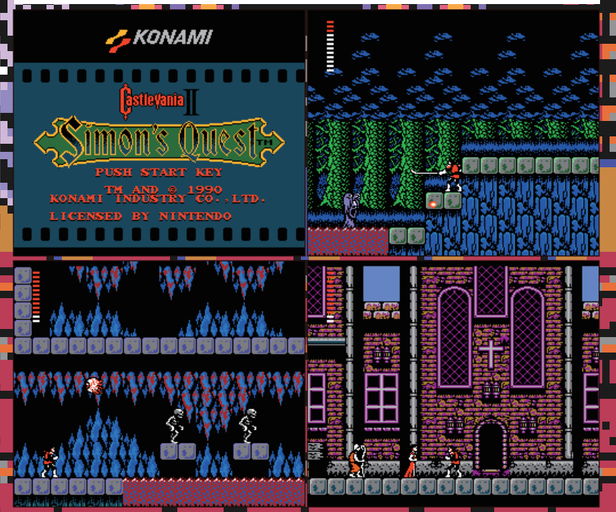
Reflections: Geebus, is this game hard. I had this as a kid (only $20 at Toys"R"Us marked as a "best seller"!), and I never even defeated the Grim Reaper, who actually turns out to be more difficult than the final boss, Dracula. I applaud what Konami did here: creating a game universe bringing together all the famous monsters from literature and film – an outstanding idea. It's definitely not for the faint of heart though, but the love fans had for this game helped propel it and its sequels into the upper echelon of the all-time big video game franchises. – PC

Castlevania II: Simon's Quest

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: Dec. 1988
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Konami
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★½

In this exploration-heavy, nonlinear sequel to the monster hunting original, players control Simon Belmont as they explore a rather large and varied world searching for the scattered organs of Count Dracula in five different mansions (very grim content for the NES). Players will be greeted with very light RPG elements such as shops, equipment, and townsfolk who may provide them with advice or obtuse hints. Simon attacks and starts with a basic leather whip, but it can be upgraded to a thorn whip and beyond at various shops by using hearts, the in-game currency, dropped by defeated enemies. These hearts can also cause Simon to level up and increase his maximum health as well as allow use of secondary weapons such as holy water (which creates a burning puddle on the floor) or bouncing diamonds (to attack hard to reach enemies). Players are free to traverse the landscape in any way they wish as long as they have the abilities and items to do so. The entire game is side-scrolling, so certain areas will have a branch at the end allowing players to continue in the direction they were headed or take a staircase that will put them on a different path. While exploring, players can discover towns or castles, which are the main targets in the game. The body parts gathered in these castles are key to progress on, as they come with important effects. The eye of Dracula, for instance, lets you see invisible blocks and platforms, while the rib can be used as a shield against certain attacks. Atmosphere is excellent here, and the game has an interesting timed night and day cycle that makes enemies much more difficult when the sun sets. Series favorite enemies are established more here, such as the aquatic fish men and skeletons that throw bones. The action and exploration is satisfying, but a poor translation of already vague clues can make this very difficult without a lot of patience (or a quality guide).

Reflections: This game gets loads of uninformed flack from people who watched one or two reviews online and never gave it a chance. Does the title have some flaws? Absolutely. It's still a very fun game that, along with Metroid, introduced us to the earliest attempts at open gameplay on consoles. Crank up the Slayer, grab Drac's ribs, and have a ball! – IF



Castlevania III: Dracula's Curse

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Sept. 1990
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Konami
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★⋆

Trevor Belmont stars in the incredibly full-featured prequel to the monster-killing, vampire-slaying franchise, where he must stop Dracula from enslaving all of humanity. Perfectly timed leaps, whip-cracking ghoulish enemies, and good use of sub-weapons are once again paramount to survival in this side-scroller. Trevor's main weapon is a whip that can be powered up twice to increase its reach and power. Popular secondary weapons (B + UP) return, such as daggers that deal quick, light damage, and holy water, which creates a small blaze where it lands. These cost hearts, the in-game currency, but careful use of these additional weapons ensures players will always have them handy (especially for boss encounters), as hearts are easily obtainable by breaking various scenery and candelabras. The game has multiple paths that will take players through levels new and familiar like the clocktower, Dracula's inner keep, and pirate ships. Players can recruit additional characters to play as, all with varying skills, depending on the stages encountered. They can be switched to during stages using SELECT. Alucard can fire a magic orb and turn into a bat to fly, Grant DaNasty can stick to walls and climb, and Sypha fights with a staff and magic abilities. The title even has different endings depending on which companion Trevor completes the game with, and contains the first appearance of fan favorite Alucard. Expert level design, a wonderful soundtrack, and bold sprites round this out as one of the best titles in the series. The quality and huge amount of replayability make this a definite must have.

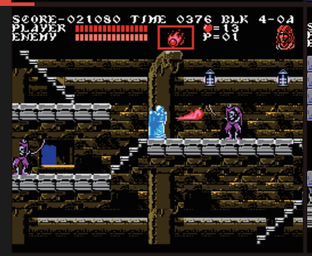
Reflections: Yes, the Japanese version has slightly better music and animation due to a special chip used only in the Famicom version. Shoo away the high horses, people! While inferior in the parts that matter little, the American release is still one of the best playing games out there, even without a simulated string section. – IF

Caveman Games

Genre: Sports, Action
Release Date: Oct. 1990
Developer: Dynamix
Ported by: Data East
Publisher: Data East
Players: 1-6 (2 simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

In this prehistoric Olympics-style sports game, players choose one of six cavemen, each with their own humorous backstory and strengths in certain events. Players can practice one of the six prehistoric events or compete in all of them in a row. They consist of a race to avoid being eaten by a sabertooth tiger, a hammer throw-like event where you toss a cave woman for distance, a fire-making event, a race on a dinosaur's back, and a pole vault where you have to jump over a T-Rex (who can eat you). Some events are definitely more well-thought-out and better executed than others, although even a strange one like the fire-making can be a little fun once you get the hang of it. The controls are not great for some of the events, nor are they very intuitive, but the originality and uniqueness of the events make them worth a play. Graphics are above average, although the sound design is a little weak. The game also contains a good bit of dark/twisted humor (competitors getting eaten is always fun), which is nice for a change as well as a chuckle.

Reflections: Published by Electronic Arts on Commodore 64 and DOS platforms as *Caveman Ugh-Lympics* (a much better name, in my opinion). I'm perplexed that Nintendo of America did not require some of the content here to be changed. It's not that it's very gruesome, but it's a bit of a more mature sensibility for an NES game, probably due to its computer game roots. I'm surprised by how common this game is considering its pedigree, but I think there was a good marketing push for it, as there was even a humorous television commercial featuring a play-by-play announcer who resembled John Belushi. – PC



Challenge of the Dragon

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: 1990
Developer: Color Dreams
Publisher: Color Dreams
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Rare
★⋆

This is a typical fantasy-themed action game where the hero must rescue a damsel in distress from an evil wizard. Players will travel through short but decently designed side-scrolling levels taking out thieves, dragons, lesser wizards, and even some more interesting enemies like pink, bird-headed humanoid creatures. Graphics are surprisingly okay from this developer, and the music, while looping way too quickly, is at the very least not too annoying. Levels don't have the most detail, but the nighttime landscapes of towns and fields, as well as some stronghold interiors, are admirably well done for a game with a sole graphics programmer. Controls are unfortunately a bit slippery, however, and falling into pits when trying to fight enemies or make precise jumps happens far too often. Combat is particularly rough around the edges. Players have one button for attacking and one for jumping, which could have made for a run-of-the-mill yet passable experience. Instead, many attacks are assigned to the one action button and they all come out randomly, like short swings of the sword, kicks, and forward-hopping kicks with a slight tap of the forward direction. The basic melee attacks come out in random combos, making things like range difficult to gauge. Even more problematic is the issue of the jumping kicks occurring with what seems like little to no forward input. This can result in a lot of jumps directly into pits for instant death. These issues make it impossible to approach any enemy with strategy. While it certainly looks cool to see these different moves, the inability to call upon them at will makes the game significantly less enjoyable. Hit detection is overwhelmingly unfair, with the player's character registering enemy hits for pixels from the toes or shoulders, showing that the sprite boxes were not programmed with much thought or precision. It isn't a total chore to play, but it still falls well below the level of quality most will want.

Reflections: Sometimes while playing, I'll mash the B button and the attacks will come out in an interesting order, looking like a primitive combo system. It's flashy and neat and I have little doubt this may have been the developer's intent, but it doesn't feel like any thought was put into implementation. – IF

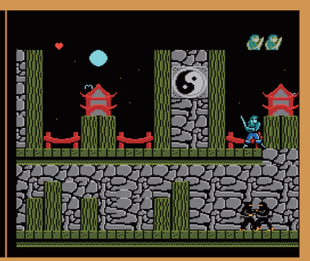
Championship Bowling

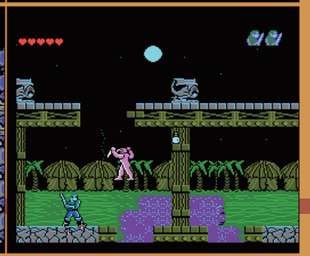
Genre: Sports
Release Date: Dec. 1989
Developer: Another
Publisher: Romstar
Players: 1-4
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

This polished bowling title functions well enough on the surface, but features little extras or features, outside of the ability for up to four players to use their own controller via the NES Four Score or Satellite peripheral. Select one of four different bowling characters with different attributes (some are better with a heavier ball, one is left-handed), your ball weight (which affects power of the throw and spin ability), the lane you want to bowl on (they vary in how the ball curves), and bowl away! Players begin their throws by selecting their starting position, then after using separate, timed meters for both the ball curve and throwing power, release the ball down the lane. The mechanics of the bowling gameplay are very precise, which takes into account your bowler's type, the weight of the ball selected, and the player's spin/power selection when throwing. The physics and movement of the bowling ball/pin reaction are very solid, allowing the player to work at and repeat the proper technique, and even allowing the ability to pick off difficult pin splits for spares. The gameplay mechanics are short-changed, however, by the game offering no modes or frills to show them off on. There isn't a career mode, no tournament mode – nothing outside of a single, standard, ten-frame bowling game. It's too bad since the core gameplay is so sound and fun.

Reflections: A Game Boy version of this title called *World Bowling* was also published by Romstar in 1990. An arcade version of *Championship Bowling* was released by Romstar as well, but that was developed by SETA and is entirely different.

As the only bowling game on the NES, it's a shame that this is only a bare-bones single-game experience. The developers could have added a little more (league mode, tournament, etc.) to really make this something special. As it stands, bowling fans, this is all you get, so enjoy it! – PC





Championship Pool

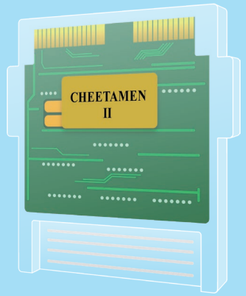
Genre: Billiards
Release Date: Oct. 1993
Developer: Bitmasters
Publisher: Mindscape
Players: 1-8
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

This billiards game features many options and modes. The main mode is a one player tournament in either 8 or 9-ball games. It's a 32 player tournament with the winner going to the World Championship. There are also modes for one-on-one single games, and a multiplayer mode dubbed "Party Mode" with many more game types. In addition to 8-ball and 9-ball Party Mode, there are also speed pool options, 10-ball and 15-ball, and more. There's also a free-play mode with no rules or scoring, and through options one can move the balls around and practice specific shots. Aiming is relatively easy, as a ghost ball will show the likely trajectory of a given shot before it is taken. Ease of aiming aside, the lack of a traditional power gauge is an interesting if not altogether successful change to basic pool formula. Players will move a target and can press A to fire the aforementioned ghost ball. Pressing the button twice will take the actual shot. Pressing B will bring up a meter where players can reduce or increase power before taking the shot. While players will grow accustomed to this method, it's a bit longer and more cumbersome, especially for a game with a multiplayer focus. The ability to pass one controller around for up to eight players in certain game types makes this a rare, no fuss multiplayer title for groups that enjoy pool. Despite some quirks, this is a very solid game for fans of the billiards pastime.

Reflections: It's hard to dress up an 8-bit pool game. This attempts the challenge by making the menus an absolutely insane mix of steam pipes and faux digital readouts. The one looping theme throughout the game had me muting the sound in about 30 seconds. – IF

Cheetahmen II

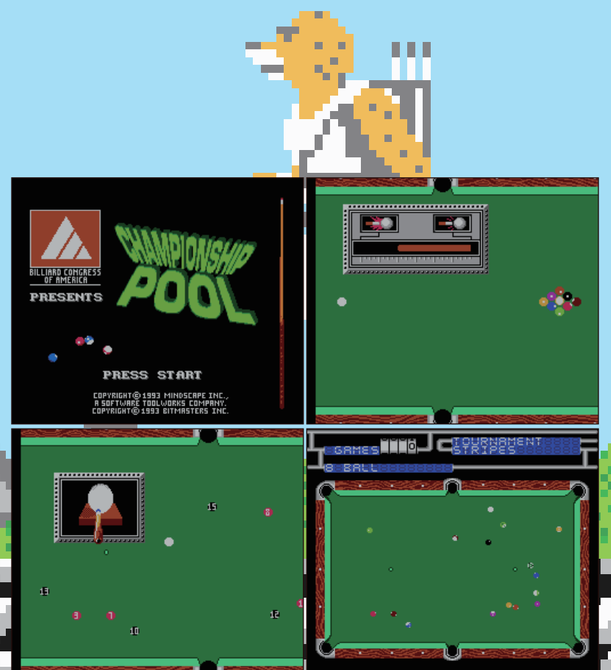
Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: 1993 (planned but not released)
Developer: Active Enterprises
Publisher: Active Enterprises
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Very Rare
💣

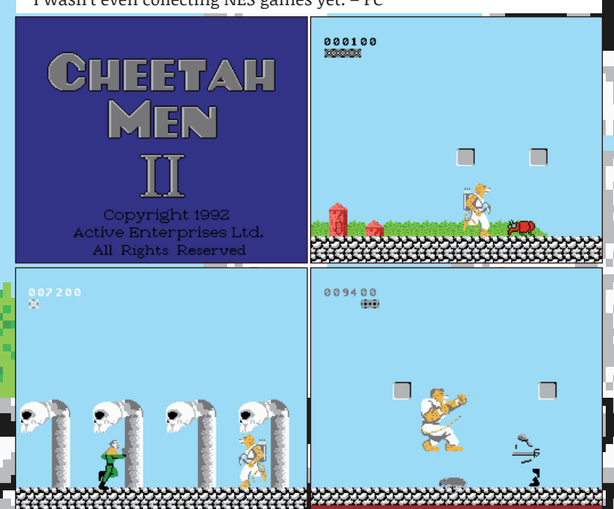


The Cheetahmen must once again defeat Dr. Morbis and his newly created Ape Man in this vague attempt at a side-scrolling video game. The controls are miserable and attacks ineffective, as many enemies travel in paths that players can't hit, and the Cheetahmen can't duck to attack the numerous low-lying creatures. Exemplifying the poor programming, enemies waltz through solid objects and the ground, and the game is actually unbeatable if you have an original copy, with it not continuing at the end of level four. Seriously, it's impossible. As far as the gameplay that is there, players will move in a choppy fashion through graphically plain environments dotted with the occasional skull or pipe fixture. Initially, players will start with the crossbow-equipped cheetah but will swap out for a larger, fist-fighting Cheetahman in level three. Both have incredibly large hitboxes and attacks that never quite zone right to hit enemies. The intro cutscene promises a battle against a horde of mutants, but aside from the occasional lizardman or bodiless suit of armor, most enemies are plain old birds, wolves, and anteaters. Bosses like the initial encounter with Morbis can be glitched so the player never takes a hit. However, in fights with the Ape Man, he/it will sometimes disappear entirely. Even with the level four bug removed, this is nothing more than an awful oddity; a delusional attempt to cash in on the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles by people who likely couldn't make a serviceable *Pong* clone.

Reflections: If you see this for cheap and it's the real, original print run version, then grab it because it's rare and worth money. Then burn it because you're a better person and the sooner the world is rid of this nonsense the better. Actually, I'm joking. Sell it to some dope and pay off your student loans. – IF

Cheetahmen II was technically never released to the public after it was produced. The game carts and separate boxes were discovered at Active Enterprises' warehouse (after they were gone) and procured around 1997 by Mike Etler, an NES collector and video game store owner who was responsible for putting together the first NES game list/rarity guide. Even though it was not 100 percent accurate in its titles and release dates, Mike has to be credited for the amount of research and time he put in to at least create an initial list as a starting point. Anyway, Mike packaged the *Cheetahmen II* boxes and carts together, had them sealed, and then sold them to collectors for $10 each. Had I known about them at the time, I would have purchased one, but hey, I wasn't even collecting NES games yet. – PC





The Chessmaster

Genre: Board Game, Strategy
Release Date: Jan. 1990
Developer: The Software Toolworks
Publisher: Hi Tech Expressions
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★⯪

The ancient strategy board game comes alive on the NES. Players select their options and piece color, and then move their pawns, rooks, knights, bishops, queen, and king against the computer or another player on the 64 square board. The object of the turn-based game is to capture enemy pieces and "checkmate" the opposing king so they cannot escape an attack. The basics are somewhat easy to learn. However, the complexity of the game and strategies involved are deep in terms of controlling the board, planning several moves ahead, sacrifcing pieces, setting up gambits, etc. The amount of options the game contains is exemplary. Besides a two-player mode, there is the ability to take back moves, several selectable levels of CPU difficulty, the ability to turn on and off CPU "deep thinking," an optional learning mode with move hints, the ability to change sides during play, the option to view a CPU game, the ability to create your own custom game by placing pieces wherever you want, and more. This is a thorough and well-designed chess game that provides just about everything you could need to have strategic board game fun. It's for all levels of chess players. Beginners can learn what "castling" and "en passant" are, but can also learn deeper chess strategy as they progress.

Reflections: Chess is not for everyone, I realize. However, if you are a fan in the slightest, you should thank Odin that this game is on the NES. Otherwise, you'd be dealing with *Battle Chess* as your only option. Thank you, Software Toolworks/Hi Tech. As an aside, I'll let you know that I was on the chess team in high school, and that I won a trophy my senior year in the state tournament – okay, I'll stop. It's also interesting to note that the title theme is the classic jazz song "Take Five" by the Dave Brubeck Quartet. It is doubtful that Hi Tech secured the license for the song for use in the game, but either way, it's cool to listen to a jazz classic on the NES. – PC

Chiller

Genre: Shooting Gallery
Release Date: 1990
Developer: Exidy
Ported by: American Game Cartridges
Publisher: American Game Cartridges
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Zapper (optional)
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★

In this first-person shooter game, the player must blast ghosts, skulls, body parts, and even humans on four different single-screen levels. The player is not attacked by enemies, but rather they must shoot a certain amount of targets, like ghouls, ghosts, skulls, etc., on screen within an allotted time. There are also eight hidden targets called "talismans" on each stage. When all 32 are found and shot, the player will move on to a bonus stage for points. The violence and gore is beyond gruesome, which includes not only shooting horror clichés, but also shooting body parts, human targets, activating torture devices to decapitate or pull victims apart, and other violent acts. However, none of it is very interesting or fun. Graphics are unrefined, and the short levels make the game completable in about 10 minutes or less. Gruesome audio voice samples add some spark to the affair, but they are equally comedic and horrific. Either a Zapper or a controller may be used during play, and even two people can play simultaneously, although the game does not seem to be able to properly register two shots made close to the same time, rendering that play option mostly useless in this "chilling" oddity of a game.

Reflections: This is the very definition of a game that was designed to just be "shocking" with little substance underneath it all. It was an arcade game in 1986 that, unsurprisingly, was not in many arcades due to its graphic nature. It's not like AGC games were widely available anyway, but I'm not sure who would ever actually purchase a game where you see a crocodile eat a decapitated head floating down a river of blood. It's interesting that the arcade version started with the goriest level, and then worked its way to the most mundane one outside the castle. The NES version reversed the order, having you work your way way inside the castle and torturing/murdering what the manual referred to as "monsters" and not humans. Nice try, AGC. Sickos. – PC

Chip ‘n Dale: Rescue Rangers

Genre: Platformer
Release Date: June 1990
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

This well-polished platform game does justice to the license by doing a great job of recreating the adventures our protagonists embark upon. Players must rescue Gadget from Fat Cat as either Chip, Dale, or both in the cooperative two-player mode. The gameplay is run and jump platforming with the added mechanic of being able to pick up many items in the environment and throw them to dispatch the henchmen on your tail. Characters like Monterrey Jack and Zipper show up to lend assistance by either opening new paths or providing temporary invisibility. A map screen will appear occasionally between levels offering up a branching path to allow players to choose where to go next. This provides a reason for at least a few playthroughs beyond the game being fun. The levels are varied and some, like the kitchen, have neat touches like taps that can be turned off by jumping repeatedly on the handles. Other levels can take you in multiple directions, giving the feeling of being in a bigger world than one is actually playing. Graphics are sharp and well done conveying the characters, enemies, and locales perfectly. The two-player mode can go from friendly to dastardly as one can pick up their friend and throw them around. Get revenge for that stolen extra life!

Reflections: Despite the constant temptation to screw with my brother, this is one of the few games he and I played cooperatively without it ever ending in a fist fight. Whenever I play with Pat I immediately try to throw him into the first robot dog. – IF

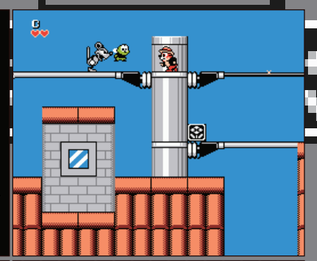
I don’t really enjoy the simultaneous two-player Chip and Dale action. It seems like your partner is more of a hindrance than a helper. But just thinking of the game makes me want to sing the theme song, though. “Some time… some crime…” – PC

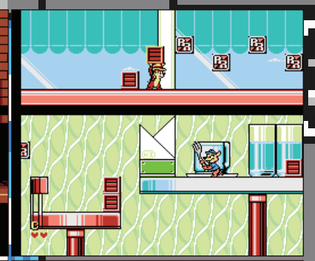
Chip ‘n Dale: Rescue Rangers 2

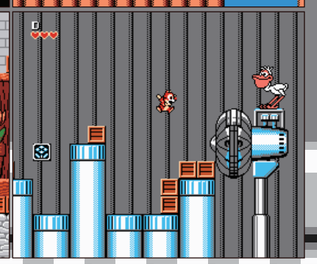
Genre: Platformer
Release Date: Jan. 1994
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★★

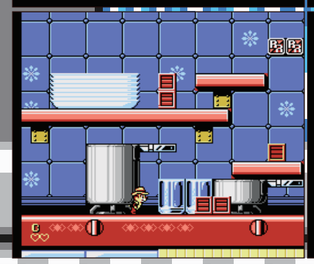
Players control Chip or Dale in a side-scrolling platformer as they must defeat Fat Cat, who just broke out of prison. The story is presented with many cutscenes that definitely lend the game the air of a cartoon episode. The Rangers must diffuse bombs at a restaurant, eliminate evil spirits released from an urn, and finally confront Fat Cat in an amusement park. The game plays fast with snappy jumps and good control. The main method of attacking is picking up various objects, like boxes and apples, and hurling them at enemies. Level design is mostly well laid out but not always the most imaginative. Fighting a boss inside a dishwasher is cool, and the amusement park levels are vibrant, but filler like generic warehouses and sewer levels aren’t the most unique. Enemies, fortunately, are unique and varied, from pirate weasels that spit rum to magician cats that toss cards. Bosses are fun and are often comprised of large sprites that look fantastic and, in fact, capture the spirit of the television show perfectly (as most of the character sprites do). Music is run-of-the-mill; the tunes aren’t bad by any means but not particularly catchy, either. A large focus here is the simultaneous co-op play. Two players controlling Chip and Dale can make their way through the levels bit by bit, fighting enemies and avoiding the attacks of their partners, which can render them dizzy for a brief moment. This mode is a good time and opens up the possibility of mischievous fun, as it is possible to pick up your partner and throw them around as a weapon. While overall this is a fun game, it doesn’t stand out from the pack as much as it could, due to some boring environments and less than clever design hampering otherwise sound mechanics.

Reflections: I was really excited to play this when it came out, as the original game was a favorite of mine. This is one of the first times I can remember feeling disappointed in a sequel, not because it was bad, but because it gave me an incredible sense of déjà vu. Why waste a valuable spot under the Christmas tree with a game I essentially already owned? – IF









Chubby Cherub

Genre: Shooter, Action
Release Date: Oct. 1986
Developer: TOSE
Publisher: Bandai
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★

This is a bizarre side-scrolling action/shooter hybrid where a chubby angel has to constantly gulp down food and candy to survive. Cats, birds, and barking dogs must all be avoided while you walk or fly across the levels to rescue your friends captured by robbers or stuck in high-rise buildings. Your only means of attack, a strange heart projectile called “Gau Cannon,” helps little as its range is limited and only can fend off the dogs. The character sprites are all cute (referencing its Japanese comics roots), but the over-the-top difficulty makes parts of the game nigh unplayable, and even taking out one of the numerous dogs while avoiding their bark can be extremely dangerous. Other enemies, such as balloons that track you, make passing through tight spaces a prayer, and the candy that allows you to fly grows more scarce as the game progresses, but is needed, since walking is not possible across certain portions of levels. The worst experience may be after falling into a stage’s pit, where instead of losing a life, the player has to work their way out of a room with invisible platforms and several enemies. You’re given unlimited lives in this purgatory, but you’re more likely to turn the game off due to the insane challenge. An angelic concept on the surface, but a devilish experience in practice.

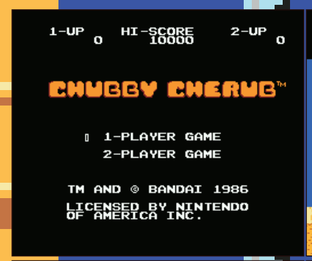
Reflections: *Chubby Cherub* sort of starts off light and fun and lulls you into a false sense of decent game security until it unleashes its full fury around stage three or so. I cannot imagine why the developers made some of the decisions they did to increase the difficulty. I thought my game cart was broken when I fell into a pit for the first time and thought that I had discovered some sort of strange glitch, especially since dying in that black room just restarts that nightmare over and over and over again. Oh, and balloons can track and kill you. So when you see a pretty balloon for the first time, instead of it harkening you back to childhood wonder, it swallows your soul. This was actually based on a Japanese cartoon where you were a penguin-looking ghost. Bandai decided to change you into a naked cupid angel for its North American release. I would have loved to have been in the meeting when they decided that was for the best. – PC

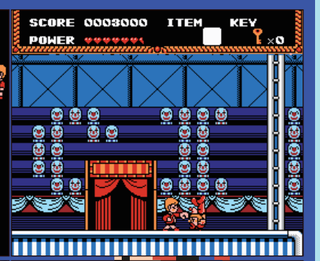
Circus Caper

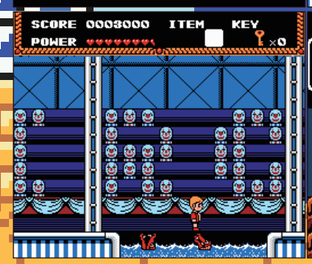
Genre: Action
Release Date: July 1990
Developer: Advance Communication
Publisher: Toho
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

Players guide a young boy named Tim in his quest to save his sister from an evil circus in this action-platformer. Armed with a big fist, kick, and available power-ups such as throwing hammers, yo-yo shields, and soccer balls, Tim battles it out with clowns, trapeze artists, baby elephants, and other deadly circus foes. Tim does not duck in this game, but rather does a “sway,” which is akin to a limbo move to avoid enemies. Each level has a different theme with distinctly different enemies and attack patterns to make this a challenging venture. Fortunately, the player is given a health meter and can find hearts along the way in stages to help. The game controls fairly well, although enemy attacks can be quick and unforgiving. This issue is remedied by the game giving you a large health bar and available snacks to replenish your health. Continues are also available, which will probably be needed by most. Nice graphics, cutscenes, good music, and several added mini-games make this a fun and polished package.

Reflections: I don’t remember *Circus Caper* being discussed or played by any of my friends, and I don’t remember it getting much coverage in *Nintendo Power* magazine either. It’s a shame, since it’s a pretty unique theme, and most would have enjoyed getting their revenge by killing the clowns who frightened them as children. I am having a hard time thinking of another Nintendo game which features such a flexible defensive move as Tim’s back-bending sway. Tim must be a yogi on the side. – PC







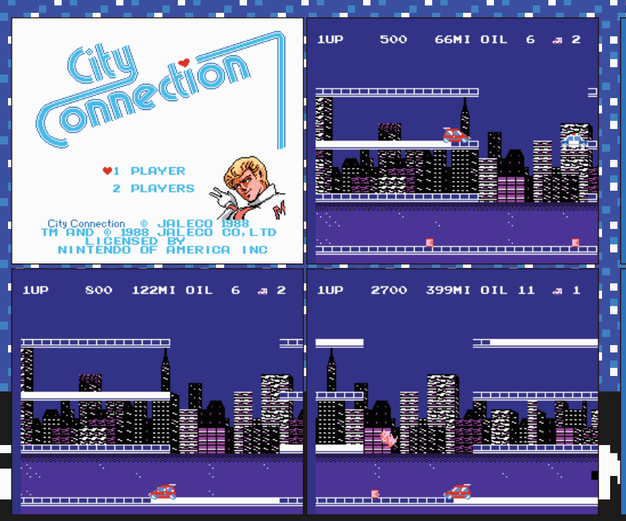
City Connection

Genre: Platformer
Release Date: May 1988
Developer: Hect
Publisher: Jaleco
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⯪

This is an addicting port of the somewhat obscure arcade car-based platformer. Each level is a city that scrolls in both horizontal directions, with four different tiers of roads that can be jumped between. Players drive a constantly moving car over the road which is made up of empty spaces that must be colored white by passing over them before moving on to the next stage. The car is able to highjump to upper sections of the road as well as do a standard jump to hop over gaps. Police cars are the main enemy, but hitting them with an oil can will cause them to spin out, and bumping them in that state will send them off screen. Players must also watch out for spikes that can grow from the road and absolutely zany cats that can wreck your ride (and are somehow impervious to any attacks). The game flickers a bit when too many sprites are on screen, but it's hard to spot many faults here if one is searching for unique arcade fun.

Reflections: This is exactly the sort of clever, weird title that has always kept me enamored with gaming in its growing stages. "We've got jumping cars and large spikes, are we missing anything? Invincible cats, you say? By golly, you're right!" – IF

This is the sort of game I would never have played as a kid if not for the insane number of mom-and-pop VHS rental stores that popped up in the late '80s. Roughly six rental stores popped up within eight square miles of my house, and they all would offer "rent one get one free" coupons and a free or reduced membership fee. Wow, what a deal! So yeah, my Mom rented this game and *Super Mario Bros. 2* for me from the same rental place, and while I probably played *Super Mario Bros. 2* about five times more than I did *City Connection*, I enjoyed this kitschy, cute game. – PC

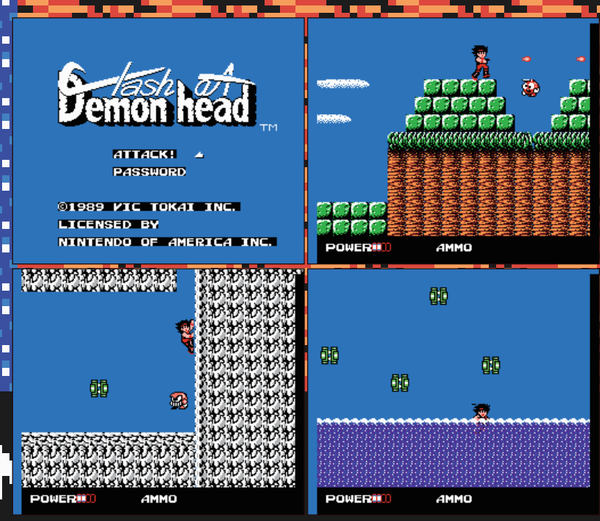


Clash at Demonhead

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: Jan. 1990
Developer: Vic Tokai
Publisher: Vic Tokai
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

This fun and fairly large nonlinear platform game tasks players to help Bang rescue Professor Plum from the Governors of Demonhead. The game starts with a map screen, and early on players are allowed to explore branching paths of different side-scrolling stages. The gameplay of jumping, running, and shooting is challenging and fun, and the cast of characters, like flying skeletons and a Ron Jeremy-esque shopkeep, has a lot of charm and personality not often seen in early NES releases – certainly not ones with little exposition. There are many power-ups that can be obtained/purchased, such as weapons/armor, and some that are required to pass through certain routes, such as a jetpack and a lava-proof suit. Breaking up the exploration into bite-sized chunks helps the game feel very manageable, as players may be required to backtrack at certain points or even replay stages. The different areas are varied, from futuristic-looking bridges with lots of jumps, to caverns that require more careful navigation than reflexes. While getting stuck or lost can occasionally become tiresome, the colorful world makes searching out the next way to progress much less of a chore. Music is usually chirpy throughout, but the game doesn't make great use of the sound chip. This solid title with lots of exploration is decidedly different and a surprising treat.

Reflections: This is one of the earliest games I can remember buying on a whim from a flea market in 1998 or so, and one that solidified my love of the underdog NES game that tries something a little different. Who doesn't love a skeleton villain named Tom who flies around in a cape? The dude is ballsy enough to fly right up to you at the start of the game and give you his address. – IF



Classic Concentration

Genre: Game Show, Puzzle
Release Date: Sept. 1990
Developer: Softie
Publisher: GameTek
Players: 1-2
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★

Based on the popular game show, this is a memory game where a board is filled with numbered cards and the contestants have to turn two over to attempt to match two with the same prize on them. If the match occurs, the cards are removed to reveal part of a puzzle consisting of pictures that represent words or a phrase. The contestant can then attempt to solve the puzzle or turn over two more cards to continue. If the cards do not match, the other player can then make their attempt. Play continues until the puzzle is solved. It would seem like a fun and simple game, but the CPU player removes any notion of either. The CPU opponent almost never forgets the card placement once overturned, but also has the uncanny ability to sometimes match three or four prizes in a row from cards never previously turned over. On top of that, the CPU seems to have X-ray vision by solving puzzles where the pictures are still mostly covered by the cards. It's extremely frustrating and will make one never want to play the single-player mode.

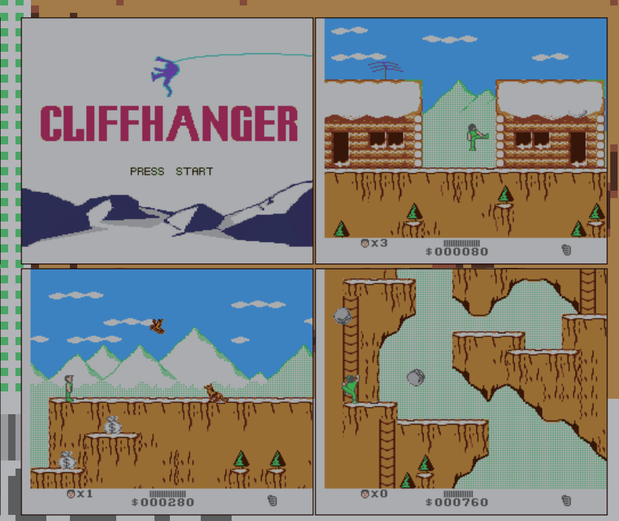
Reflections: As a kid, I loved watching this show, which was hosted by Alex Trebek. This is the rare GameTek NES strike out. It would seem that the notion of subtle AI is something the NES could not handle in order to emulate the game show properly. I'm pretty sure that the logic for the CPU player to successfully answer a puzzle is based solely on the number of cards matched and not based on how uncovered the puzzle actually is. One time I was playing and I swear 75 percent of the uncovered cards of the puzzle were over blank space. The CPU still solved it as if they had stolen the answer card from Alex Trebek's breast pocket. – PC

Cliffhanger

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Nov. 1993
Developer: Spidersoft
Publisher: Sony Imagesoft
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★⯪

In this translation of the ultra-violent 1993 Sylvester Stallone film, the player takes control of Gabe the mountain climber who is trying to rescue his friends from terrorists. Most of the time, however, the player will be punching and jump-kicking birds, wolves, and enemy thugs. The gameplay is very loose and jumping is momentum based, making the precise jumping across chasms and onto small ledges not an easy task. Weapons are available in the form of knives, guns, and dynamite which can be thrown. The human enemies are sometimes difficult to deal with due to the damage they inflict, making the weapons essential. Boss fights are nonsensical, consisting of them just trudging towards you and wailing away, turning it into a battle of "who has more energy" versus one that would employ patterns or any sense of strategy. There are two alternate gameplay levels that have Gabe climbing ladders (poorly done) and an actual mountain (pretty well done), but most of the time the player is just running and jumping 20 feet in the air through snow. Poor graphics and limited, below average music round out the short-lived experience.

Reflections: Wow, does this game look bad. For a game released in 1993, you would think that you're actually looking at a 1985 or 1986 title. The trees in the game look worse than what a second-grader could draw and the cutscenes have less detail than macaroni art. There are some bat-shit crazy things in this game, like snowboarding on a dead boss body (which is insanely cool), or Gabe getting hypothermia and losing energy if he stands still for 10 seconds (which is insanely dumb). The instruction manual for the game could be the worst one in the NES library, as it not only excludes information (like how to change weapons using DOWN + B), but also gives you wrong information (how to jump and grab rope). It also tells you that you have to have a controller plugged in to play the game, in case: 1) you never played a video game in your life and/or 2) you are a blithering idiot. – PC



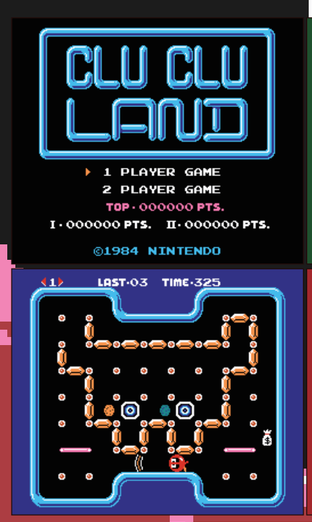
Clu Clu Land

Genre: Action, Maze
Release Date: Oct. 1985
Developer: Nintendo R&D1
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★⋆

Players assume the role of blowfish with what appear to be mechanical arms as they swim through overhead single-screen levels filled with grids of posts. As they swim between certain posts, gold bars will appear that, when all are revealed, will create a picture such as a heart or a simple bird. Play then progresses onto the next, differently shaped level. The hook of this game relies on its unique control scheme where the fish can grab onto a post and start to spin, using this to change their direction of travel. It's unique and adds an initial level of challenge, but players will soon be moving through levels with ease. It actually feels quite satisfying, and the mechanic is fun on its own. Of course, there are enemy urchins who wish to stop our blowfish from making cute pictures and will attempt to pop them with their spikes. Urchins spawn from whirlpools placed throughout the level, but there can only be a maximum of two on screen at a time. They move slowly but erratically, making them hard to predict, and they serve as effective hazards. Players can fire sonic waves directly in front of them which temporarily stun the urchins, allowing them to be pushed into walls and dispatched for a short time. In addition to the main objective, players can collect fruits and other bonus items in the level for points, time freezes, and access to bonus levels, all in pursuit of the high score. While not everyone will love this decidedly odd title, its uniqueness is undeniable and the difficulty curve smooth enough to keep hooked players coming back for more.

Reflections: This was one my very first NES games, and as such I have a lot of fond memories playing it with my family. I also have fond memories of playing it with the highly competitive neighborhood brat because it was one of the few games I could beat him at, and this always resulted in much pouting and fit-pitching. – IF

I must have skipped out on zoology class, but I don't recall fish having claws. This is a fun game, but it can get a little awkward having to spin around each post to get the coins to appear (note that the design was later copied for the rupees in *The Legend of Zelda*). I still don't know why it's called *Clu Clu Land*. It's one of those mysteries I've learned to live with, or maybe I'm too lazy to look it up. – PC



Cobra Command

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Nov. 1988
Developer: Data East
Publisher: Data East
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★⋆

Players take control of an armored helicopter and must rescue soldiers in this horizontal shooter. Armed with guns and missiles, players must take out enemy soldiers, tanks, aircraft, etc., while searching for grounded ally soldiers who will wave to the player. A rope will drop down from the player's copter, which friendly troops will climb up to be rescued. The mission ends when the specific amount of soldiers is found and retrieved. Gameplay can proceed either left or right, which is accomplished by flipping the copter via the Start button. The main draw of each mission is to destroy enemy fortresses to reveal underground pathways, where the majority of troops await to be rescued. While there are some nice features, like the ability to upgrade your copter, and the design and music are solid, the gameplay falls short. The screen does not smoothly scroll when flying left/right. Rather, it seems to have a set amount of space before the entire screen has to pre-scroll for the player to continue. This unfortunately makes the game sluggish and frustrating to play since it's hard to get into a rhythm, and it makes engaging and avoiding enemies tougher than it should be. Also, on-screen information is absent, and very important info, like the number of soldiers remaining to be rescued and the copter's shield strength, can only be accessed cumbersomely via a selection menu. A big misfire from Data East.

Reflections: It's hard to look at *Cobra Command* without thinking about its inspiration, *Choplifter*. Hugely successful on computers before appearing in the arcade and consoles, *Choplifter* pioneered the helicopter rescue shooter genre. It's a shame that it was never ported over to the NES (it was for the Famicom), since if it had been we wouldn't have to endure this inferior Data East knock-off. – PC

Cobra Triangle

Genre: Action, Racing
Release Date: July 1989
Developer: Rare
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⋆

This bizarre speedboat game features a variety of level types. It's viewed from an isometric perspective and players can control the boat using one button to accelerate and another to fire a gun. Some levels simply task you with reaching the finish line while avoiding or shooting down other boats. Others have you disposing of mines by moving them from one area to a marked detonation zone, all while other boats try to steal them back or guns on the shore try to blow you up. There are segments that resemble obstacle courses with ramps, whirlpools, and logs to navigate. Then there are the large sea monsters to destroy, like a giant or a fire-breathing sea dragon. The game isn't great in execution and it's just not as fun as it sounds, despite having loads of creativity in its favor. A little more polish and balance certainly would have helped in all areas, especially the long and frustrating boss battles.

Reflections: Loads of unrefined ideas mean this is a cool one to check out, but I doubt many people will continue to come back. The speedboat has a propeller that sprouts at the end of each level to fly it to the next, which leads to me to wonder why it's bothering with these insane death contests in the first place. That is a fire-breathing beast, boat. Not a friend. – IF

Code Name: Viper

Genre: Run and Gun Shooter
Release Date: Mar. 1990
Developer: Arc System Works, Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

As Agent Viper, the player is tasked to take out a South American drug cartel in seven levels of action. Players use a side-arm to take out various foes, including unarmed enemies and some armed with a weapon. The player traverses levels left-to-right, and can jump back and forth between the ground and an upper level to avoid and seek out more enemies. There is a small health bar (which can be increased slightly), which will deplete based upon two enemy touches or a single projectile hit. Controls are pretty solid, which is essential since the player will be required to duck, quickly turn, and fire to take out several enemies in succession at times. Many doors in the stages randomly hold either hostages for points, more ammunition for your pistol, a possible machine gun upgrade, or a bomb which has to be collected to complete the level. None of the doors are marked, which means the player will have to stop and go in each one to see what (if anything) is inside. Unfortunately, this interrupts the flow and turns it from a fast-paced experience to something a bit more methodical, which the bare-bones gameplay doesn't really support well. The difficulty is above average, and some enemies with cover fire too quickly to easily get a shot in without being killed. It's an alright game for a playthrough, but misses the mark a bit.

Reflections: Let's talk about the elephant in the room. *Code Name: Viper* is a blatant re-skin and rip-off of the Tengen port of Atari's *Rolling Thunder*. It's the same exact game in look, feel, and controls. The only real difference is the jumping, where the player here has more control and can shoot while in the air. The beauty of *Rolling Thunder* is the pacing of the game, and a successful player has to run almost headlong into danger at some points and react at the blink of an eye to conquer certain areas of the game, especially given the small time limit. This is the beauty of the game, and much of its charm. Slowed down though, as it is in *Code Name: Viper*, the experience falls apart a bit, as an arcade engine/experience that just doesn't work quite the same for a more straightforward action game. – PC

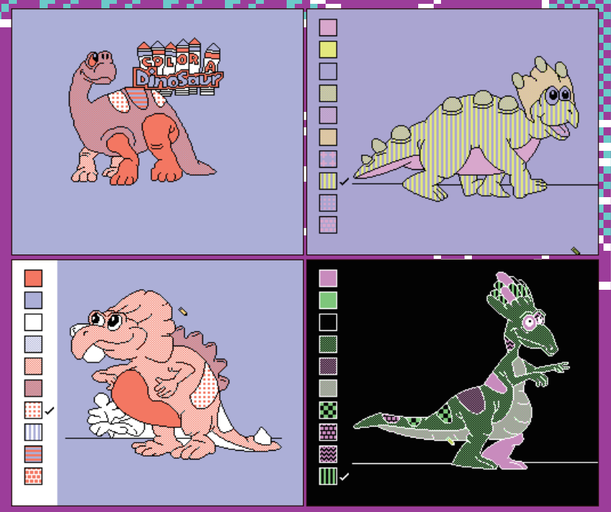
Color a Dinosaur

Genre: Creativity
Release Date: July 1993
Developer: FarSight Studios
Publisher: Virgin Games
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Rare
★

This coloring book style program (this can't really be called a game) features many different dinosaur outlines to fill. There isn't really any coloring or drawing going on here, and the cartridge can't save the finished work. After selecting what drawing to color, a pencil icon can be moved from unfilled segment to segment, at which time a color may be picked from a palette and used to fill the empty space. There are multiple palettes and some of them utilize pretty funky colors and patterns (striped, plaid, etc.), with some even flashing. It's easy to whip up a trippy-looking Triceratops, but once that's been done there is nothing here to keep anyone, even a child, amused and coming back for more. A draw option for more open creations would have gone a long way to making this better for kids, but the truth is this just didn't need to exist. A parent could get a mountain of coloring books (with mazes and puzzles!) and a big box color set of 64 crayons (with sharpener!) for far less than the price of an NES cartridge.

Reflections: This always gets requested during the charity marathons Pat and I have done, and while I can see where people would think it would be amusing for us to play this gem, even they realize pretty quickly that an hour of using *MS Paint*'s fill function to "color" daffy ass-looking dinosaurs gets old quickly. The title's main claim to fame is having music by video game composition legend Tommy Tallarico. – IF

Geezus, *Color a Dinosaur*. I have spoken to Tommy Tallarico in person about this game and the only thing he really remembers is that he developed a composing tool to make NES song writing easier (this tool has since been found on a prototype of this cartridge). This oddity in the NES library has a special place in my heart for the sheer audacity of the concept, besides featuring bizarre cartoonish dinosaurs who all look like they just smoked a bowl. – PC



Commando

Genre: Run and Gun Shooter
Release Date: Nov. 1986
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

The player takes control of Super Joe in this overhead, vertically scrolling run and gun shooter. Armed with a machine gun and limited grenades (obtained in the levels), the player has to pass through and survive almost limitless enemy soldiers, bazooka troops, enemy trucks, pillboxes, and more. The action is quick and never lets up as the player must continually trek up vertically, or else be swarmed by foot soldiers who will continually respawn as soon as they are killed. There is an apparent limit to the number of characters on the screen at once, so seeing enemies disappear randomly happens often. Controls are responsive and are up to the difficult task, and even the awkward grenade-throwing (they can only be thrown straight ahead) will become second nature after a while. The one-hit deaths makes every move and advance treacherous, requiring attentiveness. Ends of levels have the player having to take out a plethora of soldiers who will emerge from a fortress/bunker. There are some nice added touches that were not present in the arcade game, such as several power-ups that can be obtained (bulletproof vest, etc.) as well as hidden bunkers that can be entered to rescue POWs or capture bonus objects for points. It's a flawed but still a competent port of a fine arcade game.

Reflections: This is not an easy game to beat. As a child in the arcade, I remember getting destroyed and having my quarter wasted almost as quickly as if I had played *Dragon's Lair*. This version of the game has four very long stages instead of eight stages in the arcade. I'm not sure why it was decided to change that, other than perhaps a greater challenge since you can continue and start at the beginning of each stage? This query will have me losing many hours of sleep.

Commando was also the first video game ever purchased for me by my father, a port for the IBM XT bought at Electronics Boutique at the mall. I still remember their gorgeous computer game section, when console games were barely given any shelf space at all (if any). My father also purchased Infocom's *Sea-Stalker* text adventure game for my sister, just so she wasn't left out. – PC

Conan

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Feb. 1991
Developer: System 3 Software
Publisher: Mindscape
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★

This is a unique attempt to add some puzzle solving to a side-scrolling action game that falls apart with the horrid controls. Conan starts barefisted, but can find swords and other weapons by defeating enemies. This is done by mashing A and B (which represent horizontal and vertical swings), but strategy never feels involved. Good thing the skeletons, gargoyles, and other monsters never seem to care what plan of attack you use. Moving and jumping are even worse. Players will definitely fall to their death many times when first playing, as jumping is a nightmare. Two types of jumps exist for some reason. Pressing UP will make Conan jump upwards in place and the other, done by pressing DOWN, is used to make Conan leap gaps. If that wasn't confusing enough, things like a simple crouch must be done by pressing and holding A and then pressing DOWN. All of this makes things astoundingly confusing and guarantees that simple tasks, like picking up items, are a nuisance. It's a shame that the controls ruin matters, as beating each level usually revolves around figuring out a neat little puzzle based on defeating certain enemies and using the items, such as pitchforks or Medusa heads, to attack larger bosses and open paths to the end of each stage. This would really add a lot of fun to a standard action game, but it isn't enough to redeem what's here.

Reflections: The theme could definitely be revisited and turned into something very successful and fun to play. This blotchy mess does disservice to some decent design ideas. – IF

Conflict

Genre: Strategy
Release Date: Mar. 1990
Developer: Vic Tokai
Publisher: Vic Tokai
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

This turn-based, strategy war game plays on a hex map with different terrain affecting movement and battles. Fight it out against an opposing army using infantry, tank, air units, etc. The player can earn "fame points" by occupying cities and destroying opposing army units (which can be used to earn new units). The strategic element of the game works somewhat on a paper-rock-scissors level based upon the units' type, with some combat choices/strategy thrown in. A good variety of battle units makes this a deep game, but the animated turn-based battles themselves are a chore and a bore to sit through and play. Players and the computer have the ability to micromanage individual battles and make choices back and forth, seeing the result play out. An auto battle option can take care of this issue (and is recommended). Besides long battles, the enemy's turns can take a while to complete. One strange aspect of the game is the very similar look and color both the "red" army and "blue" army units have, making them a little hard to tell apart. This game will be off-putting to many, but adored by hardcore strategy buffs. Either way, it's definitely one where you'll need to examine the manual in order to play.

Reflections: On paper, *Conflict* seems like a fine strategy game to me. But coming from a gamer who has played many a strategy title, I found this one a little disappointing. The turn-based battles do not seem intuitive to me in the slightest, and even with the manual's help I still did not enjoy sitting through them. It seemed like a totally random mess at times, even though I know it was not designed to be that way. Give Vic Tokai plenty of points for trying, though. – PC

Conquest of the Crystal Palace

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Nov. 1990
Developer: Quest
Publisher: Asmik
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★

The Crystal Princess has been kidnapped and it's up to players to rescue her from Zaras in this well-made action platformer. At the beginning of the game, players are given a choice of three orbs: Spirit, Flight, and Life, which grant boosts to attack, jump, and health, giving players a nice little way to tailor the game to their strengths. Emphasis must be placed on careful platforming as the levels are well designed with many cliffs, steps, and floating platforms that provide a variety of ways to hop through the different landscapes. Combat is fairly basic with a sword to attack. Enemies drop coins that can be collected. These can be redeemed for power-ups like healing herbs, extra lives, and weapon upgrades that can be purchased from Kim, a brave lady in a pink gown who just happens to be standing around in the midst of the battlefields. A useful dog sidekick named Zap adds a lot of fun to this title, as players can switch between attacking with their sword and using their pooch pal to get at enemies further away. Cute sprite work and catchy tunes add to a very good package. A fairly meaty challenge and some levels that go on just a touch too long might be a bit frustrating for some and are the only marks against this otherwise entertaining title.

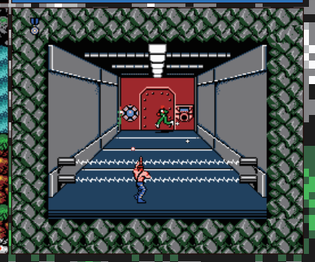
Reflections: I'm not really certain why this game isn't more well known or liked. To me this fits an NES ideal: fast-paced action games that reward reflexes and a just a little memorization. It has some cute quirks as well, like the merchant lady who transforms into a news anchor to give you an update on the story. Get your news from QNN! – IF

Contra

***Probotector** (PAL)*
Genre: Run and Gun Shooter
Release Date: Feb. 1988
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Konami
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★★★

Commandos Bill and Lance must battle through eight levels of peril to take down the alien Red Falcon and his horde of troops in this sizzling run and gun shooter. Action almost never lets up as players encounter a plethora of foes (soldiers, gun turrets, etc.) that increase in variety as the stages progress. Each level has a varying theme, such as Waterfall and Ice Field, and there are even two "base" levels which play in a third-person perspective behind the player to switch things up. To assist the player, several power-ups are available via pill boxes and flying capsules, including a fireball gun, machine gun, laser, and the ultimate: the spread fire gun which fills most of the screen with several bullets. Difficulty is high as enemies will swarm at times, and timing has to be spot-on to not only avoid enemy attacks but also the numerous obstacles and traps the levels provide, like mortar rounds and timed lasers. The one-hit deaths ensure quite a challenge. Fortunately, controls are smooth and react well to command, and the eight-way directional shooting and precise jumping is a godsend. The game is a blast to play, as it is very satisfying mowing down enemies and challenging the unique stage bosses, which aren't just cookie-cutter, but are all very different, requiring different strategies to defeat. Presentation is top-notch with excellent stage themes, sound effects, and graphics that more than get the job done. The very fun simultaneous two-player mode is the icing on this already delicious and nearly flawless cake, which players will relish at a riveting pace.

Reflections: This is one of the few times where the console version of the game is far, far superior to the arcade version, which was clunky, didn't control too well, and graphically didn't look as distinct as the NES port. *Gryzor*, the Famicom version, was even better, as it added a few additional visual elements and even story cutscenes and map graphics in between stages. The difficulty of this game is fierce, so much so that many are not able to beat it without the famous 30 life "Konami Code" – UP, UP, DOWN, DOWN, LEFT, RIGHT, LEFT, RIGHT, B, A. *Contra* looked different from just about every other NES game before its release, which is why many were excited for it. I was so jazzed that even my parents knew about it, which is why my Mom graciously purchased the game for me. However, when I arrived home from school, she proudly displayed *Kung-Fu* – the game she had purchased instead. I'm not sure how she confused *Contra* with *Kung-Fu*, but it didn't help when she basically said to me, "What's the difference?!" I cried about it all day, and didn't end up getting the game until at least a couple weeks later at Kiddie City. So close, yet so far, Mom. – PC



Contra Force

Genre: Run and Gun Shooter
Release Date: Sept. 1992
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Konami
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★

There are five levels in the third *Contra* game; three standard side-scrolling and two that are from an overhead perspective. The player must blast through enemies and obstacles in levels using four different characters, each with different weapons and maneuverability. These characters may be switched off on the fly, or the player can choose to use a second character to assist with cover fire or attacks for a handful of seconds, which is a nice touch and useful for clearing enemies. Unfortunately, enabling this via menu can slow the game down. Weapons for each of the characters can be changed to a different/more powerful one when power-ups are collected and activated using an onscreen menu similar to some shooters, where the player can hold onto power-ups and collect them and activate on a meter later. Everything looks fine on paper but the gameplay could be better. Levels throw obstacles and new stage elements far too quickly at the player without giving the player time to adjust. There is also an unfortunate high amount of slowdown which occurs even when only a few different characters are on the screen at one time. It makes for a well-made but sluggish and unsmooth gaming experience.

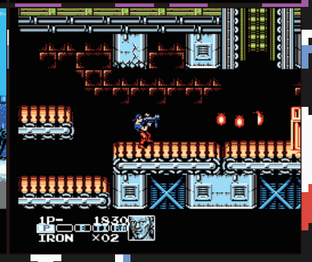
Reflections: The bastard child of the *Contra* library, *Contra Force* was not intended originally to be a part of the series, but had its title changed (apparently) to help boost sales. It's difficult to judge this game without thinking of the other games in the series, which creates an unfair bias against it. If this game had a different title, I think it would be regarded better by most gamers. The "assist" feature is very interesting with the different options available, but I think having it always available to the player is detrimental to the flow of the game, since you have to pause and bring up the menu and unpause to activate it. Plus, you can use it an unlimited amount of times. It's powerful, but annoying to use. I'd rather it be not annoying to use but weaker, or annoying and powerful but you can only use it a few times. Keep the game flowing, Konami! – PC

Cool World

Genre: Action
Release Date: June 1993
Developer: Ocean Software
Publisher: Ocean Software
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★

Help Frank stop Holli from doing something nefarious in this title based upon the animated/live action film. The game gives about two lines of exposition before unceremoniously dumping the player into a mess set in the cartoon world from the movie. Frank can be moved freely in an isometric foreground and interact with ledges as platforms in the background. He can jump with A and attack/duck with B. Attacking with any of the three limited weapons (ink pen, eraser, and nickel bomb) requires tapping the duck button (B). This makes zero sense because the actual act of ducking is near useless. The limited ammo situation for the pen, eraser, and bomb would be a huge problem if killing enemies actually mattered. As soon as one foe is dispatched, another generates immediately and they all make a beeline directly for the player. At least the cartoon baddies, like sewer alligators and what appear to be mobster chipmunks, have a bit of terrifying charm to them. The best strategy is walk and don't attack. The player is fortunately given a beefy life bar to make up for the constant cheap hits. A little variety is thrown in the form of some auto-scrolling skateboarding and some minor puzzle elements, but this is yet another clumsy, repetitive, and poorly controlling licensed film game.

Reflections: This is another incredibly odd choice for a video game port at a time when games were largely still seen as kids' stuff. A perfect example of why movie tie-in games are so awful. With very little plot to gamify and a rushed production schedule, all you could possibly end up with is an incoherent mess. – IF



Cowboy Kid

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: Jan. 1992
Developer: Pixel, Visco
Publisher: Romstar
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Rare
★★★⯪

Sam is ready to become sheriff, and with the help of Little Chief (in two-player mode), he seeks to take down wanted criminals! Enemies come out of the woodwork in nearly every 2.5D-perspective screen (some screens are in a side or top-down view, and one entire stage is vertically scrolling on horseback). Once officially sheriff, Sam has a choice of six wanted posters to fulfill, with a seventh unlocked for the finale. The stage order is open, but the best experience comes from completing them sequentially to acquire weapons (knife-pistol-rifle). Sam begins most stages in or near a town where enemies walk about. Doorways lead to places such as stores, saloons, and homes, where NPCs may provide valuable information. Coins can be found in chests, and breaking barrels reveals money bags. Shops sell a variety of helpful items, such as a map, a bullet-proof vest, and food to replenish health (in the lower left). The towns and nearby locales are fairly open, although barriers such as locked doors or a broken pathway require Sam to find the necessary object or person to proceed. At the end of each section is a boss fight, which needs to be completed within the allotted time. While losing all health costs a life, running out of time results in a game over. Sadly, this entertaining adventure suffers from bad attack mechanics. Sam's entire body can take damage, but he only swings from the upper part, forcing him to attack from below until he acquires one of the guns. It's also necessary to stutter-step, as speedy Sam can quickly run into oncoming enemies. If you can get past the awkward aspects of fighting, the rest of the experience should see you smoothly riding off into the sunset.

Reflections: Who brings a knife to a dynamite fight? Seriously, I was taken aback that you don't have a gun from the beginning. If I'm going to fantasize about being in the Wild West, I want a firearm! I also found it disheartening that everyone on the streets can damage you, whether they're an enemy or not. Furthermore, it's not immediately apparent who's passively walking toward you and who's on the prowl for an attack. Despite my complaints, I did enjoy the game; I'm a sucker for exploring. I can only imagine that it would be twice as nice with my own Little Chief by my side. Or I could be Little Chief; I don't care! – KY

Crash 'n the Boys: Street Challenge

***Street Gangs** (PAL)*
Genre: Action, Sports
Release Date: Oct. 1992
Developer: Technōs Japan
Publisher: American Technōs
Players: 1-4 (2 simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

This is a clever and violent urban take on the Olympic style sports game in which teams compete for glory by participating in consecutive events. Players select a team of four with individual characters appearances and associated stats. All the classic events are represented (swimming, pole vaulting, hammer toss, hurdles, etc.), but they have a twist. For example, pole vaulting is actually a rooftop race where contestants launch over alleys and use unicycles on power lines. In the swimming event, players can leap into an opponent's lane, shove them underwater, and punch them out until they must resurface and gasp for air. The fighting event is a straight-out fun brawl with fighting and wrestling moves. The game has lovely graphics and flair for days, but all of the extra gameplay elements to consider in these events exacerbate what is already a problem: the controls. Sorting out what does what in each event is a real chore, and even when the controls are memorized, the gameplay can often be too frantic for its own good. The footrace involves learning how to run, jump, throw weapons and charge tackle through hurdles or blockades; this takes a while and none of that knowledge carries over to the next event. The game has admirable depth, but the enjoyment one will get out of this largely depends on the amount of time one is willing to dedicate. Despite all of this, the game is really quite fun and unique, especially in multiplayer mode with those on a similar skill level.

Reflections: Perhaps too much of a good thing is the problem here. I really love the idea, but playing with any skill requires a good amount of dedication to learning each event in and out, more than the pick-up-and-play nature of similar, less stylized, titles. There was an ice hockey and basketball game that never made it here to the United States that would have utilized similar wacky rules (much like Technōs' own *Nintendo World Cup*), and it's a real shame we never saw them on our shores. – IF

Crystal Mines

Genre: Action
Release Date: 1989
Developer: Color Dreams
Publisher: Color Dreams
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★

Players takes control of a mining robot to fetch underground crystals on overhead grid stages. Each stage has a set number of crystals to retrieve. When that occurs, an exit will materialize where the robot must move to in order to escape to the next stage. Standing in the player's way are boulders and underground monsters who will eliminate the robot in one touch. The robot can fend off the creatures via an energy gun or by collecting and detonating dynamite which can also destroy the robot if not careful. The weapons are used also to destroy the dirt and mud spots to open up areas around the stage and get at the crystals to be collected. Some enemies cannot be destroyed with the standard weapons, and can only be taken out by having boulders dropped on them. This is more difficult than it should be since boulders only fall when the dirt underneath is destroyed; they cannot be pushed onto the enemies. Technically substandard in both graphics and sound, the game isn't a terrible experience as the controls are adequate enough to see the gameplay through to reach a slight level of mediocrity.

Reflections: It's strange that the game makes clear that the human out to get crystals is in no physical danger since they are using a robot to capture them. So... you're nothing but an entrepreneurial robber out to separate the poor underground lava creatures from their wealth. Why am I invested in the goal of this game again? I'm all for capitalism, but that doesn't need a game that replicates the blood diamond phenomenon.

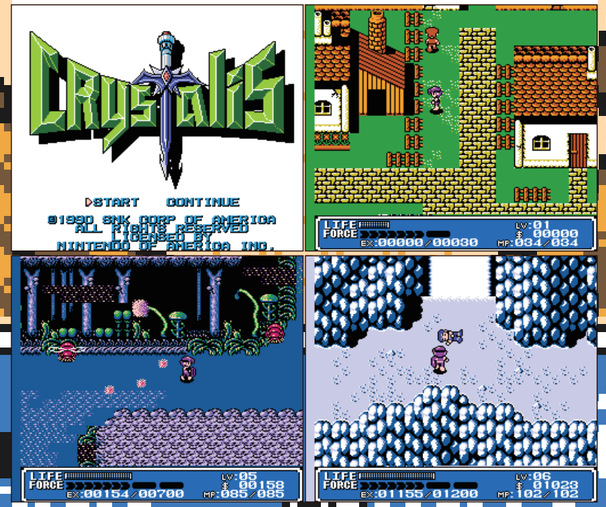
If you've never played a Color Dreams game before, you'd think that *Crystal Mines* is substandard fare. However (and unfortunately), you'll see as you delve deep into NES Color Dreams library that it is one of the highlights. It's sad, but it's the truth. – PC

Crystalis

Genre: Action-RPG
Release Date: July 1990
Developer: SNK
Publisher: SNK
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★⯪

In this excellent and full-featured overhead action RPG, the hero awakens from a high tech chamber within a cave and must set out to help eradicate the mutant monsters roaming the land, all while solving the mystery of the floating city. A healthy amount of equipment, puzzles, items, NPCs, and towns really make this feel more fleshed out than similar titles of the time. Talking with villagers is important to gain key clues and items. Armor, shields, and swords are all upgradeable to enhance defense and attack statistics. Swords all grant special abilities, like the Sword of Wind, which destroys rock walls, and the Sword of Water, which grants the ability to create ice bridges in specific scenarios. Swords also are effective against certain enemies, while some enemies can be immune to a certain blade, ensuring that all swords need to be rotated and used effectively. The game relies heavily on events or key items to overcome blockades, like windmills that won't power on or flutes to summon insects or dolphins. The large inventory and the breadth of effects granted by these items, coupled with the journeys and NPC interactions needed to get them, help this feel like a much more interactive and immersive adventure game. Players feel like they are part of a simple but living world. The adventure takes place across deserts, dungeons, oceans, floating fortresses, and a variety of fantasy locations to keep things fresh. Enemies range from simple slimes and mushrooms to much more intimidating vanishing wizards and other brutal bosses. The action is snappy and fun, with sword attacks being both standard and able to be charged for more power. Enemies have tricky but learnable patterns, making tougher encounters not about brute force but about biding one's time and striking when appropriate. Magic is also available that can do things such as heal the hero or paralyze enemies. While not earth shattering, these are fun and effective to use in combat. The mixture of fantasy and post-apocalyptic worlds create a fun game world to explore. Quality graphics and a wonderful score are additions that put this one over the top. Absolutely recommended.

Reflections: I've always felt that SNK's little Zelda killer never got enough recognition. Not that *The Legend of Zelda* is bad, by no means is that the case, but while some may not have cared for the change in style brought on by *Zelda II*, *Crystalis* would soon come along and fill that void. I'm still surprised by how many people I'm introducing to the game for the first time through my job at a game store. – IF



Cyberball

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Mar. 1992
Developer: Atari Games
Ported by: Tengen
Publisher: Jaleco
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★⋆

This futuristic football game on a vertical field consists of teams of seven robot players each. Four different teams can be selected with different strengths and weaknesses. The offense/defense both select from a playbook – pass, running, and option plays for offense and short, medium, or long yardage coverage for defense – and then square off on each down. The gimmick is that there are no first downs like in real football, but rather the ball acts as a bomb which must be defused by reaching the 50-yard line before resetting and then the end zone. If the offense does not reach these points after a handful of plays, the ball will blow up causing a turnover (and the destruction of a player). The gameplay is inadequate. The passing mechanics have your player simply point and throw in the direction of a few designated spots depending on the play called. It's awkward in practice, as are the handoff plays which occur by pointing in the direction of the running back and throwing the ball, which can be easily missed. There are no field goals nor extra points; after a touchdown a one-point conversion can be attempted by throwing or a two-point conversion by running. There's also the option to purchase a new quarterback if enough money has been earned in the game. There are limited features: a single game can only be played with the ability to change the difficulty/number of plays. The only partially saving graces are the inclusion of a two-player co-op mode and the excellent voice samples.

Reflections: Supposedly this football series of games has somewhat of a cult following, but damned if I have ever heard of anyone who plays it. Maybe it's the arcade version that people fell in love with, but when you have me wishing and praying for *10-Yard Fight* or even *John Elway's Quarterback*, you're in trouble. – PC

Cybernoid

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Dec. 1989
Developer: Hewson Consultants
Ported by: Gremlin Graphics
Publisher: Acclaim Entertainment
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

In this shooter with three available difficulties, players must navigate a combat vessel equipped with lasers and rockets through maze-like levels before the time bomb explodes. Each screen presents sets of obstacles to navigate, from missile silos and large green blobs to fast moving waves of enemies. Players are equipped with a standard laser and limited secondary weapons that can be switched and used: bombs, genocide missiles, shield, bouncing shots, seeker missiles. These are limited, however; more can be obtained in packing cases as well as two other weapon power-ups: a rear-firing laser blaster and the cybermace offensive/defensive shield. The controls are a bit difficult to grapple with, as the player can fly freely in any direction but will always be pulled down when not in motion. This poor design choice makes precision, a must in a game of this sort, nearly impossible. Intense challenge is always fine in a game, but the player has to feel like they have the means to tackle it fairly. The fact that players will start with nine lives on any difficulty mode feels like a cheap cop-out on actually crafting a balanced game. Music is fairly decent and the graphics are serviceable, but a lot of repetition makes it rather boring looking. There is an alright concept here, but many will lack the patience to stick with this for too long.

Reflections: This game started out as a home computer title and was actually quite well received. I'd be interested in seeing if the other versions are better. I'm not certain if my issues with this game are its own fault or porting issues caused by Acclaim. – IF

Dance Aerobics

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Mar. 1989
Developer: TRY
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save, Power Pad (required)
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

This Power Pad exercise title consists of the player using side B of the peripheral to follow the movement of an aerobics instructor in an exercise routine. Three different modes are available. Dance Aerobics mode has the player following the female instructor in eight different classes. The routine will be demonstrated and then the player will follow suit in tandem. If the player does not hit the proper mat spots at the same time as the instructor, one of 10 coins will be taken away. If 10 mistakes are made, the class will end and the player will be unable to advance to the next one. If players are successful, they will be given a stamp (password) and move on to the next, more difficult level with more complex routines. The Pad Antics mode consists of three mini games: Tune Up (making music with the Power Pad), Mat Melodies (following along with a tune while moving on the Pad to match where green dots are moving on screen), and Ditto (the player has to use their hands and feet on the Pad to match where the green dots are, moving one after another in succession). Finally, Aerobics Studio features a five-, 10-, 15-, or 20-minute Dance Aerobics workout. The aerobics routines are the true highlight here, featuring numerous movements, with some being more elaborate. Some routines even require better than average athleticism due to the flexibility and/or jumping required. The variety of the routines will keep players interested, with some even utilizing both hands and feet on the Pad. Not all the modes are great in practice, but if you're looking to sweat while doing some aerobics, this game performs as advertised.

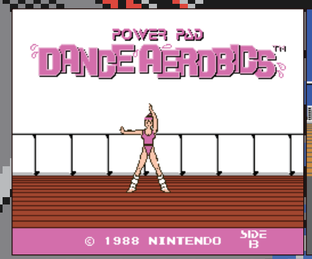
Reflections: If anyone questions my love of the NES or if I actually play any of the games reviewed in this book, look no further than the Power Pad games, and in particular *Dance Aerobics*. I've not only played this game for a Pat the NES Punk video (in Mario boxer shorts, no less), but I've also played this game live more than once for the NES Charity Marathon, sweating up a storm in the process. No one should ever question my dedication, nor my love of sweatbands. – PC

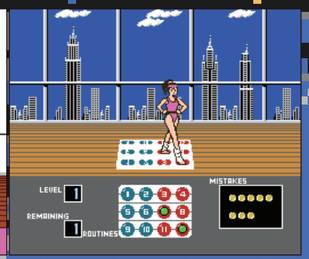
Danny Sullivan's Indy Heat

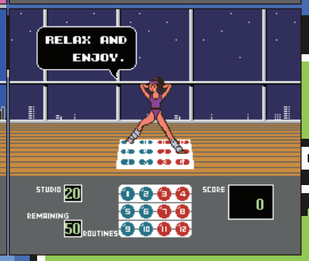
Genre: Racing
Release Date: Aug. 1992
Developer: Leland
Ported by: Rare
Publisher: Tradewest
Players: 1-4 (simultaneous)
Special Features: NES Four Score / Satellite compatible
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★⋆

In this overhead, single-screen racing game, players take control of an Indy car on various U.S. race courses against four other drivers. Players drive on the courses for several laps using the accelerator as well as limited turbo boosts to give the racer short bursts of extra speed. Players must manage their fuel during the races, as both they and the CPU opponents must usually come in for a pit stop at least once per race when running out of fuel or if their car catches on fire from too much damage. This element of the game adds a minor degree of strategy, since a player can decide to pit earlier or later, or risk running out of fuel before completing a race. Players accumulate circuit points and cash based upon where they placed in the races, and after each race can upgrade their racers for better performance (breaks, engine, tires, fuel efficiency), increase their pit stop speed, and purchase additional turbo boosts. It's a very simple and somewhat short game with meager presentation, but the nice controls make it fun, the variety of racetracks is pretty good, and the ability for four player simultaneous action provides a nice bonus.

Reflections: The faces in the game that are pasted onto the drivers (of which you select one for yourself) are so unnecessary but very humorous. This game is basically a minor modification of *Super Off Road*, which is obvious since the gameplay is almost identical and, well, it comes from the same development team. It doesn't have quite the same charm as that title though, but it seems a little sharper and smoother to me, and the pit stops are a fun addition/change. Speaking of the pit stops, it's amusing to see the miniscule pit crew come out to work on the cars, and you can even run over members of the pit teams (!), which is pretty funny. There is a decided lack of big-breasted women on this semi-sequel, though. Maybe somebody wrote a letter or two and complained... back when people did that sort of thing. – PC





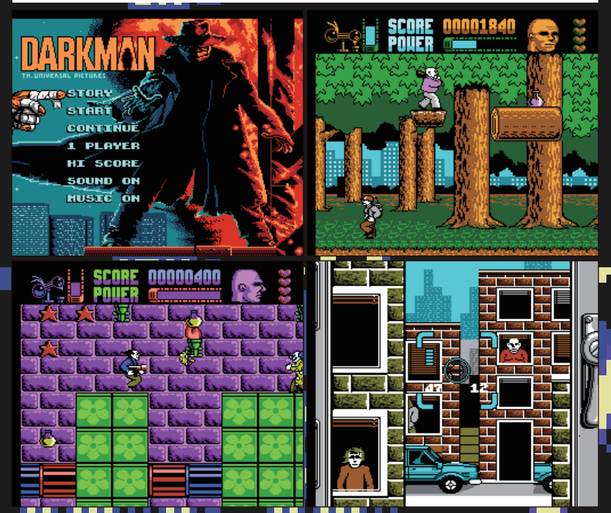


Darkman

Genre: Action
Release Date: Oct. 1991
Developer: Painting by Numbers, Ocean Software
Publisher: Ocean Software
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

You're Dr. Westlake, a scientist horribly burned when a mobster's gang attacks your laboratory. Time for revenge! The eponymous film is adapted well, with excellent graphics and music, an alternating two-player mode, and varied gameplay. Unfortunately, the controls are literally a fatal flaw. You move like you're rollerblading and can easily run off platforms, and your wall-climbing ability is similarly volatile. Combat, too, is frustrating, with your punches and kicks randomly failing to hit enemy goons while their attacks sometimes knock you back to your death. Foes such as construction workers, ninjas, clowns, and fish are themed to their locations and appear alongside hazards including crushers and buzz saws. Collectible chemical beakers throughout the levels grant extra power (life) at the end of each. Stages include a warehouse, Central Park, Chinatown, and others. Some have ludicrously difficult moving platform sequences that require you to press the correct direction in time to shift onto the right track and avoid death. Inscrutable balancing microgames also add an unwelcome challenge, forcing you to stabilize yourself on a tightrope or a ball using A and B while a meter at the top of the screen teeters back and forth. Besides platforming, there are stages where you hang from a helicopter by a rope while avoiding traffic and stages where you take photos. There, you move a camera viewfinder across a street view, snapping your target villain when they appear in windows while avoiding enemy fire. You use the pictures to construct a disguise impersonating them; more photos means more time to complete the next stage. Your costume can grant abilities, such as a projectile weapon or higher jumping. At the end of stages, you fight the genuine articles, which are like stronger regular enemies. This repeats until your revenge is complete. Darkman should've tried therapy instead.

Reflections: I remember seeing *Darkman* (1990) on TV as kid and being disturbed by Dr. Westlake's plight. It's strange that I watched it, since it's rated R, but like several other R-rated films, an NES game was made anyway. I recently rewatched *Darkman* and enjoyed it. With young Liam Neeson starring and Sam Raimi directing, it's odd that people don't talk about it much anymore. Certainly it deserved a better game; the gulf between the audiovisual and design quality versus its controls and difficulty is astounding. – KN

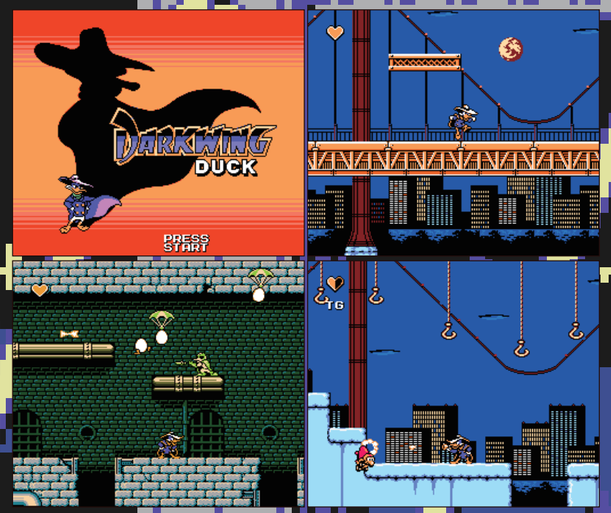


Darkwing Duck

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: June 1992
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★

Save the day as Disney's masked mallard in this challenging and precise platformer. Players navigate Darkwing through two sets of three side-scrolling stages, which are selectable in any order, before moving on to the final stage. Players will fight FOWL henchmen in well-detailed locales from bridges and sewers to forests and skyscrapers. Everything has a great cartoon look that matches the show, from the basic duck-billed thugs to cute little rocket turtles. End level bosses are based on main villains from the show like Quackerjack and Bushroot, and they require learning their patterns of attack to succeed. Darkwing has a gas gun with unlimited basic shots and can pick up limited use secondary shots like Lightning, which fires at angles, or Arrow, which can be used to reach hidden areas. Only one type can be carried at a time, so learning what is most useful in a given area is a handy skill. Darkwing himself also has a few valuable tricks up his sleeve that make him a more agile and less vulnerable hero. Players can press UP, which will cause Darkwing to use his cape to shield himself and deflect lesser projectiles (although larger ones will still need to be avoided). He can also hang from almost anything (hooks, platforms, and even switches and levers), which allows him to get around easier and is also used for simple puzzle solving at certain points in the game. The level design is challenging but not so heavily based on memorization. Spots like pits, that must be crossed by jumping from hook to hook, are challenging but can be beaten with patience and timing. This helps the game feel fair, but the checkpoints are few and far between, which means missteps result in lengthy trips through ground already covered. Despite the minor annoyances, this is yet another fun Disney/Capcom title.

Reflections: Despite reports that this was created with a modified *Mega Man* engine, it isn't quite the clone people often think. The order of the stages isn't really important as the special weapons are available in all stages. This makes the game less about luck or knowing the proper path through the levels and more about conserving ammo and making exact jumps. – IF



Dash Galaxy in the Alien Asylum

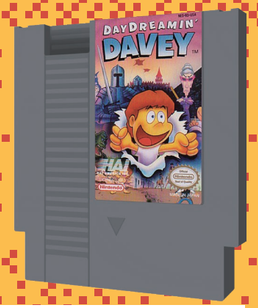
Genre: Platformer, Puzzle
Release Date: Feb. 1990
Developer: Beam Software
Publisher: Data East
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

Space explorer Dash Galaxy is trapped within a maze-like rocket. With quick feet and a sharp mind, he must navigate 25 floors of puzzles and platforms to gather items essential for progress and victory. Viewed from an overhead perspective, each floor contains a handful of doorways, blocks, and force field barriers. Dash isn't required to enter every door and can step back into the elevator to reach the next floor. What stops him from being able to do this continuously is that he needs keys or bombs to deactivate the force fields. The side-view platforming rooms are where those goodies, oxygen flasks, and extra lives lie. Occupying the rooms are enemies, such as bats and wheeled robots, which Dash needs to avoid if he doesn't want to drain his oxygen bar in the lower right. This naturally depletes over time and is refilled when he first enters a room or floor. Aside from the dangerous creatures, there are also objects that help Dash, such as trampolines and hovering platforms. He exits a room from the same door he entered, but it doesn't reopen until he's collected all the blue switches. Over time, new obstacles, such as ice physics and slides, freshen Dash's exploits. However, the floors look similar, and the rooms have simplistic, overly repeated visuals ranging from outdoorsy mushroom platforms to metallic steel beams. The graphics are not impressive, but what this game offers is a challenge on two scales: safely collecting items in individual rooms and completing the game altogether since not all items in a room, not all rooms on a floor, and not even all floors are required. It's an interesting experience that is unfortunately held back by its poor graphics.

Reflections: *Greetings, reader! Dash Galaxy here. I heard you were interested in playing out my adventures in the Alien Asylum. If you're looking for a simple run-and-jump game of an Italian man, this is not for you (I'm not even sure what an "Italian" is). Mine requires careful thought and precise movement, perfect for all advanced lifeforms! It sure would have been nice to have a password system so that the weaker of you could continue if you lose all my lives, but my agent tells me I'm not supposed to speak ill of my sponsors, so… buy from Beam Software and Data East! Maybe then they'll remake my game and give me an actual face!* – KY

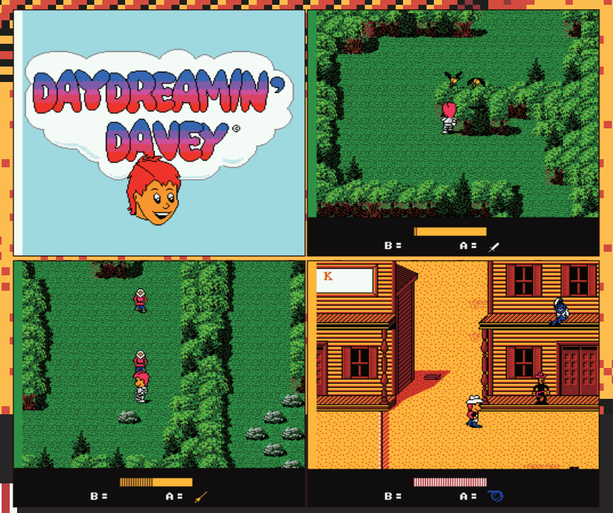
Day Dreamin' Davey

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: June 1992
Developer: Sculptured Software
Publisher: HAL America
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save, Zapper (optional)
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★



Players take control of Davey at school who daydreams himself adventuring in medieval times, mythological Greece, and the Old West. Gameplay consists of overhead action whereby the objective is for Davey to find an item to complete the level. To do so, the player must travel from location to location collecting objects/clues in a specific order to continue on, all the while battling enemies on the ground and in the air. Different power-up items and weapons can be collected and used; each level has specific melee and projectile ones. For example, there are swords and spears in the medieval world; sword, shield, and bow/arrow in Greece; and several guns in the Old West. As a slight bonus in the Old West levels, there are "quick draw" first-person mini-games where the player has to quickly shoot the gun out of the bandits' hands using either a cursor via the controller or by shooting with the Zapper. The game does a nice job of changing up the three different environments and associated enemies. However, the combat itself is uninteresting and buggy, as the hit detection isn't the best and enemies can seem to "stick" to the player and continually attack. The premise and story is unique, with nice sound samples and cutscenes, but that does not totally make up for the gameplay shortcomings and repetitive nature of the experience.

Reflections: It seems to me that Davey is modeled loosely after Calvin from the legendary *Calvin & Hobbes* comic strip, who used to often daydream and imagine himself in outlandish scenarios. Either that, or Davey is simply a poster child for ADD, as he can't seem to stay focused on reality for more than seven seconds at a time. I truly wish that the finished product here was a bit more polished, as it had potential to be something special due to the concept alone. Who doesn't want to imagine themselves off on a great adventure, especially during a boring class? Half the time in class, I'd either be doing that or drawing dinosaurs flying fighter jets. That was a Calvin & Hobbes reference, if anyone was wondering. Go out and buy a book or two if you've never read it. – PC



Days of Thunder

Genre: Racing
Release Date: Oct. 1990
Developer: Beam Software
Publisher: Mindscape
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

Based loosely on the film of the same name, this NASCAR racing simulation puts the player on the eight-race Series cup. Players accumulate points for each race based upon their placement. Gameplay takes place in third-person view behind the race car, although a first-person display shows the car's dashboard, MPH, car damage, etc. The racing itself is a slog, with players having to use the proper track lines to make turns without hitting walls and keeping speed. Damage/wear to the car's engine, tires, and low fuel will require the player to plan for a pit stop, and this is where the game goes downhill. Instead of it being automated, in the pit, players must select and control individual team members and have them work independently on the car. It's extremely unnecessary and a detriment that the controls are more complex during the pit stop than actually driving. There are some nice ideas here for a racing game, but none of it is entertaining.

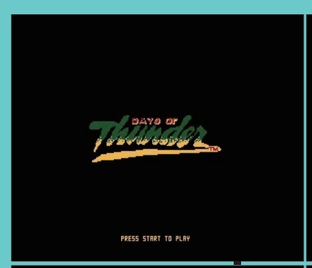
Reflections: There's an outside chance that you would enjoy this game more if you were a NASCAR fan, or a fan of the *Days of Thunder* film (if there are any). But seriously? I know that the pit stop and pit crew aspect of racing is very important, but I never knew of anyone who wanted to try and simulate that experience in a racing game. That's barely a step above playing an oil changing simulator. – PC

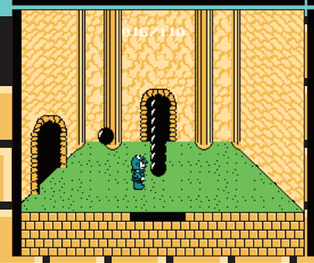
Deadly Towers

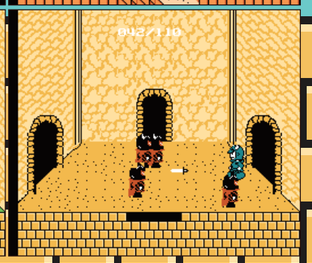
Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: Sept. 1987
Developer: Lenar
Publisher: Brøderbund Software
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★

In this adventure game, players explore a large variety of maze-like, isometric dungeons and must stop the advance of the evil King Rubas by burning down his seven evil bell towers. Players take command of Prince Myer and explore towers, looking for the main boss of each level who guards the bells while collecting better equipment and avoiding many enemies. The actual exploration in the game is fun, with huge areas to navigate. The combat is pretty miserable, however, and involves Myer tossing projectile swords in four directions while walking in eight. This makes lining up attacks annoying on what often becomes a very crowded screen. The best strategy is to inch along, watching enemies' patterns and taking shots carefully, with many required in most cases to defeat them. While some of the bosses are fairly cool, like bears, killer plants, and centipedes, the majority of low-level beasties are incredibly unexciting things like puddles, bouncing balls, and what appear to be Slinkies. The graphics are a mixed bag, but the music is surprisingly good with a limited but driving soundtrack. It's an interesting game in spite of its many problems.

Reflections: While certainly not a showstopper on the system, *Deadly Towers* is far from the worst game on the system. The reason titles like this and *E.T.* for the Atari 2600 are constantly lambasted in articles about awful games is because they give the writer a number of amusing things to rip on while playing something mediocre. These games often have good ideas at their core and some very interesting concepts that never quite play out the way the developer hoped. Very few people would ever write about the absolute worst games because it would actually be an unfun, unfunny experience. – IF







Death Race

Genre: Action
Release Date: 1990
Developer: American Game Cartridges
Publisher: American Game Cartridges
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Rare
★

A remake of the 1976 arcade driving game, this title involves vehicular combat from a bird's-eye view perspective. Players start by outfitting their car by purchasing weapons (guns and missiles), car body, tires, and engine. When play begins, driving is done from overhead, with UP accelerating and then LEFT and RIGHT turning each way, no matter the current orientation. The controls work fine for driving around, but it's frustrating that the car cannot back up. The objective is to find all the flags in the squared areas and then find the exit on the border wall. Players will have to contend with humanoid "gremlins" who will sometimes fire missiles at the player, but can be shot or run over. Silos will fire missiles that will heat seek, and helicopters will harass the player with gun fire. After completing a level, the player can repair and upgrade their car for the next stage. The gameplay and driving is functional, but not well-thought-out. When driving, the car does not stay in the middle of the screen, but can drift to one edge, which makes it so that the player cannot see what's in front of them. Unless the player's car is upgraded sufficiently, it will be next-to-impossible to avoid the copters that will stick on the player's tail and gun them down. Even if the player survives the first few levels, the difficulty ramps up to even greater heights, with the screen being filled with multiple missiles that the player will have to avoid at the same time. Graphics are poor, with there being little detail for the stages – especially the miniscule gremlins. It's not a bad idea on the surface, and even has a two-player co-op mode, but it's bland and poorly thought out in execution, making even driving over "gremlins" unfun.

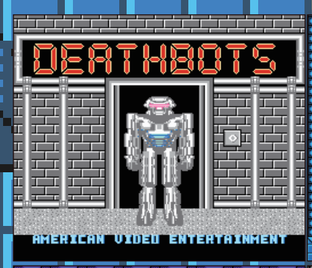
Reflections: The 1976 arcade game of the same name from Exidy was one of the first "controversial" video games due to the ultra-violent theme (at the time). I've had the pleasure of experiencing the game myself. It's a monochrome overhead driving game, and the player has to drive over gremlins there too. The difference is that in the arcade game, the dead gremlins have tombstones that appear in their place. If you look at the box art for the NES version, you'll see it referenced there. Of course, both of these game versions were influenced by the 1975 film *Death Race 2000*, starring David Carradine and a young Sylvester Stallone in a command performance as Machine Gun Joe Viturbo. That film's plot had the violent racers driving cross-country, and mowing down innocent pedestrians for points. Check it out for a twisted, dark comedic experience. – PC

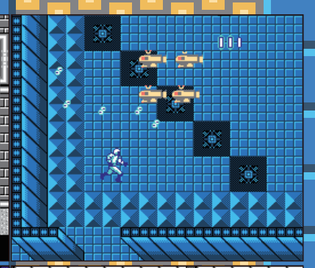
Deathbots

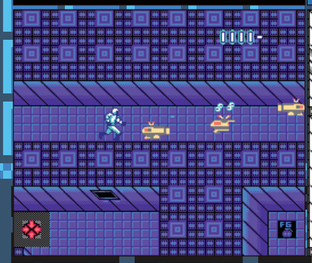
Genre: Action
Release Date: 1990
Developer: Odyssey Software
Publisher: American Video Entertainment
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★

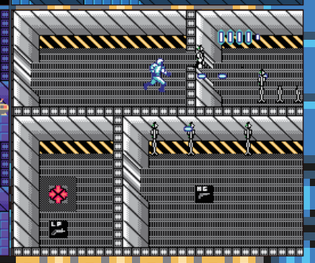
In this overhead-perspective action game, players take control of a battle suit and must blast through eight floors of rooms and hallways to destroy a Gamma Bomb. Robot drones stand in the player's way. Different weapons (laser pistols, laser rifles, grenades), shield belts, and power packs are scattered throughout the rooms at computer terminals. The player can pick up the various weapons/items and then equip and use via a selection screen. Transporters can also be found to gain access to other locations, and mines must be avoided. There's not a lot of space to maneuver in the rooms and the plethora of robot enemies constantly fire, making the game a veritable shooting gallery and a battle of attrition. Also, your gun's ammo is inexplicably not shown on screen, and when you pick up the same gun of one you already have in inventory, instead of increasing its ammo, it will become an additional item that you will have to switch to when the current gun runs out of ammo. Poor design elements like this, as well as the thoughtless gameplay, make this title come off as an alpha build of a game that could have had some promise had more thought and time been put into it.

Reflections: Oh gee, I wonder what movie franchise featuring a killer robot the game's cover art is supposed to be ripping off? When you load the game up, the main menu denotes "NES version," as if you weren't sure what system you were playing it on. How about less time spent on helpful hints like that and more on your game's shoddy design, Odyssey Software? – PC









Defender II

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: July 1988
Developer: Williams Electronics
Ported by: HAL Laboratory
Publisher: HAL America
Players: 1–2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

This is a stripped-down home port of the difficult classic arcade shooter *Stargate* (itself a sequel to *Defender*). Players must eliminate every enemy in each horizontal-scrolling stage before moving onto the next while protecting the humans who sit helpless on the ground below, in order to gain bonus points. Stages allow for free movement left or right, and a radar display is present to show where enemies remain and if any are in the process of abducting a human. Shooting an enemy who is capturing a human gives players a chance to swoop up the hapless biped before they hit the ground for extra points. Warp gates appear in the levels to move players quickly to another location where humans are in need of rescue. Unfortunately, this seems to happen sporadically at best and can often place a player exactly where they don't need to be, a definite problem in a game where time is of the essence. Enemies are relentless and fairly smart, and there is a lack of helpful items, such as shields or instant warps, that should have been included to offset this issue and increase the strategic nature of the game. The title is still fun but feels a bit bare bones. At least it offers something of interest for fans of score attack gaming.

Reflections: The true title of this game upon release was *Stargate*, and that's the only way you'll ever find it in arcade form. Williams, who published the arcade version and allowed other companies to publish the home versions, was very interested in keeping the Defender name and thus dubbed it *Defender II* for most all home releases. There are a few instances of it being called by its proper title, such as the Apple //e version, but those are the minority. – IF

Defender of the Crown

Genre: Strategy, Action
Release Date: July 1989
Developer: Cinemaware
Ported by: Beam Software
Publisher: Ultra Games
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⋆

Wage war across medieval England and Wales to become the true king of the land in this turn-based strategy game. Players start by choosing one of four suitors for the throne, which each have different stats that affect play style, including swordplay, leadership, and jousting. Battle rages across the map, with each county having a flag representing which leader owns each borough. The overall task is to reclaim the entire land and unite the country. This is done by amassing armies consisting of horsemen, soldiers, and catapults, each costing considerable gold. Gold, prestige, and even land can be claimed by hosting and taking part in tournaments which consist of first-person jousting and spiked mace beat 'em up fights. Winning the tournament is considerably difficult, however, due to poor controls. A better source of income is to raid an enemy fort; if three sword fights can be won, then the risk is rewarded. This is the easier option, but stiff controls hinder what could have been fun. Gold is needed to have enough troops to engage and defend against the enemy. Taking over land ensures more income each turn, but if spread too thinly, the player's army can be wiped out. Warring on the battlefield begins a fight between clans. Sending orders such as outflanking, attacking, and bombarding with catapults will result in victory or utter defeat. When an enemy knocks on the castle door, another mini-game is triggered consisting of defending the ramparts from incoming archers in a target shoot. Failing to hold the enemy back results in the game ending. Approaching castles prompts the player into firing a catapult (fire and disease bombs) to break down walls to enable allied troops to attack. Considering the given character skills, winning a joust or a skirmish boils more down to luck than actual skill. The computer is merciless in its approach and there is no difficulty curve to ease in new gamers. Not even the occasional appearance of Robin Hood (lending aid to the cause) can help sway the odds in this interesting, but supremely difficult and poorly controlling take on what could have been more fun. There is a lot on offer here, but being a Jack of all trades and master of none just doesn't cut it.

Reflections: This is a conversion of its acclaimed Amiga older brother, and it shows with the poor controls that were clearly more suited for a mouse. It is let down by the sheer wall of inaccessibility, as you can succumb to the game in less than 10 minutes. A tutorial mode would have been a great way of showing players the ropes while seeing the more fun side to the game, or even a practice mode to hone skills in each mini-game. Still, there are some fun points, as the variety on show is promising, but the controls are the sticking point. Shooting barrels of disease at people always makes me laugh, and one of the characters to choose from is called Geoffrey Longsword. If that doesn't make you titter, then move along, there's nothing to see here. – JE

Defenders of Dynatron City

Genre: Action
Release Date: July 1992
Developer: Lucasfilm Games
Publisher: JVC
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★⋆

In this side-scroller, you guide cola syrup-mutated superheroes through five missions in order to defeat Dr. Mayhem and his robot/monster army. Though you control only one at a time, you begin with four heroes, three of whom are pre-determined (Toolbox, Buzzsaw Girl, and Monkey Kid). The fourth is your choice of Jet Headstrong, Ms. Megawatt, or Radium Dog. Each has his/her own health meter, as well as individualized attacks, special moves, movement speeds/styles, and damage tolerance. Toolbox strikes enemies at close range with his hammer head, while Buzzsaw Girl, Monkey Kid, and Ms. Megawatt use projectiles (circular saws, banana bombs, and lightning bolts, respectively). Both Jet Headstrong and Radium Dog can fly; the former launches his head to attack, while the latter has a super bite. Pressing START/SELECT allows you to change your hero, and also lets you access your map and see your money and superchargers (special power boosters from enemy bosses). Money allows you to buy health-replenishing food and character-specific power-ups at the mall, but these types of items can also be found inside various city buildings. Each mission begins with a list of objectives, such as ridding the streets of robots and destroying a blimp. Though the mall, factory and final missions only require you to travel left/right, the sewer and city missions force you to travel north and south as well, which leads to this game's first problem: navigation. Though you have a compass, finding your way is not intuitive, and you will likely have to check the map every minute to ascertain you and your enemies' positions. Adding to the tedium is the atrocious hit detection, which saps the fun from combat. Finally, you are saddled with a strict time limit which, if not met, results in a hero getting captured. With its colorful characters, interesting missions and fun story, this could have been a wonderful game, but the aforementioned issues really hold it back. Try it anyway, if only to see what might have been.

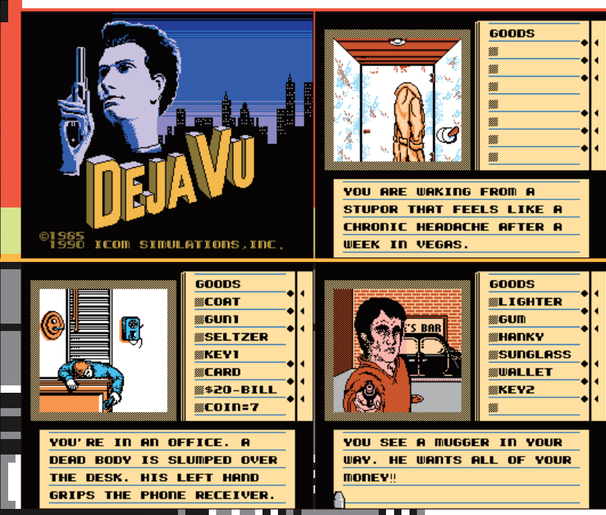
Reflections: Life must be so hard for the fair citizens of Dynatron City. After all, it's not just those robotic dinosaurs overrunning the mall that make it tough to keep up with the latest fashions. How do you achieve the hottest celebrity styles when all your local celebs are atomic cola superhero mutants?! All those young men trying to be like Toolbox are getting hammered – while sober! Jet's fans are losing their heads keeping up with his look. And women used to go under the knife regularly, but to achieve Buzzsaw Girl's glamour, the knife goes under them – it's too tragic! And don't you go thinking that the animal members of the Defenders have no ill effects on the population's wardrobe. Have you talked to the mailman in Radium Dog's neighborhood? Do you know what he has to wear to protect himself from the bite of that plutonium pooch? That's right: lead underwear. Ruff. – AP

Déjà Vu

Genre: Adventure
Release Date: Dec. 1990
Developer: ICOM Simulations
Ported by: Kemco
Publisher: Kemco
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⋆

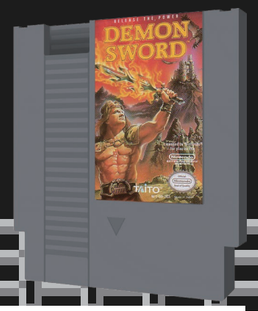
You wake up in a dingy bathroom stall in 1940s Chicago with a pounding headache and no memory. Thus begins the story, which follows the adventures of Ace Harding, a hard-boiled private detective, as he uncovers clues to the cause of his mysterious amnesia and avoids being framed for murder. This is a first-person point-and-click adventure game, in which you move a cursor around the screen to navigate through various areas of the city. Beyond using basic commands such as OPEN, SPEAK, and HIT to interact with objects on the screen, you'll also need to collect items and leverage your inventory to overcome obstacles and deal with the many people you'll encounter throughout the game. It's a static environment for the most part, but that allows you to collect your wits and be able to think your way through most situations. The NES's graphical prowess is effectively used in the point-and-click interface to give the feeling of what is effectively a graphical pulp novel. In the end, this has enough atmosphere, clever puzzles, and engrossing plot to make it a great play for any fan of the adventure genre.

Reflections: This was the second adventure game ported from Macintosh to the NES by ICOM Simulations, but actually the first game made by ICOM in 1985. This freshman outing is arguably the best of their offerings. Gameplay is extraordinarily similar to the other two ICOM games released for the NES – *Shadowgate* and *Uninvited*. What is most strikingly different from those other two games is that *Déjà Vu* is firmly grounded in a realistic and nonsupernatural setting, which tends to make the puzzles more approachable. For example, in *Shadowgate*, to get past a room of fire, you might need to put a blue crystal in the left-hand notch to get by safely. But if you put a red crystal in the right-hand notch, a dragon comes to swallow you whole. In *Déjà Vu*, to get by a mugger on the street, you punch him in the face (though doing this too much will get you shot), which has a foreseeable cause and effect. Death is harder to come by in this game, and makes more logical sense when it happens, which in turn makes for a less frustrating experience. While all the ICOM games are fun to a degree for fans of point-and-click, this one gets extra points for accessibility. – JD



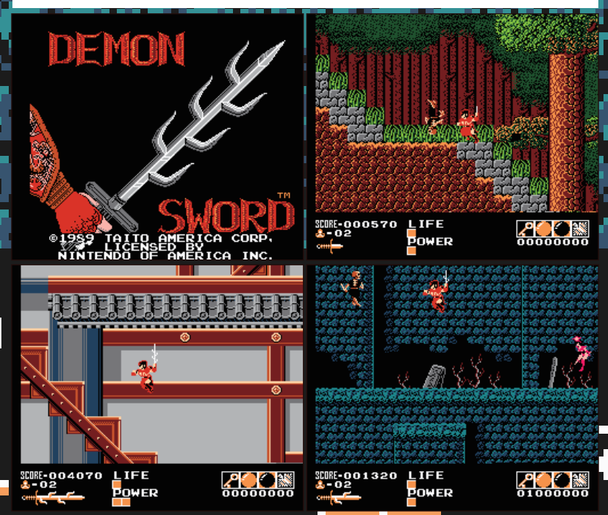
Demon Sword

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Jan. 1990
Developer: TOSE
Publisher: Taito
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★



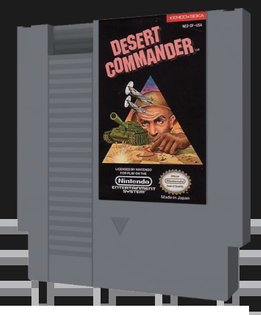
Lots of enemies and quick movement feature prominently in this fast-paced action-platformer. The hero, Victar, starts with a short sword and generic throwing stars and must defeat the boss in each stage. The game is relatively short, having three worlds with two levels each and one final level. Stages start out with a simple left-to-right structure but become increasingly complex. Climbing stairwells and navigating labyrinthine environments, including the final level's Brimstone Fortress, add some decent variety. The standout feature of the game is an incredibly high jump with absurd hangtime. Early levels, such as the forest, can be cleared surprisingly fast by simply holding jump and leaping from treetop to treetop. It is an immensely satisfying mechanic once learned, and it gives certain aspects of the game a martial arts movie quality. Blazing along, slashing skeleton soldiers out of the sky is a blast! Later levels still allow for a bit of this acrobatic fun, but it becomes very restricted in a few places, which saps some of the energy out of the experience. Power-ups are numerous and range from keys for opening Mystic Gates to life bar extensions and magic (e.g., screen-clearing lightning, shadow doubles that can attack). The sword itself is upgraded every two levels, increasing its reach and strength. Shurikens can gain power with special magic, which must be obtained from bonus rooms within Magic Gates, where a simple sub-boss fight can occur. In fact, most of the boss fights in this game are based on fairly easy pattern recognition; the challenge comes from the levels themselves - but there's an interesting catch-22. By adding level variety, the stage progression is kept from getting stale, but the freedom to use one of the best mechanics, a wildly spectacular jump, is stifled a bit later in the game.

Reflections: I remember borrowing *Demon Sword* from a karate instructor when I was about 10 years old. I enjoyed it once I got used to the controls, and along with its precursor, *Legend of Kage*, it ended up being one of the first carts I bought when I started collecting video games around 1999. Recently, I learned that the Japanese version on the Famicom has nearly double the stages, which means that it's definitely on my "to play" list. – IF



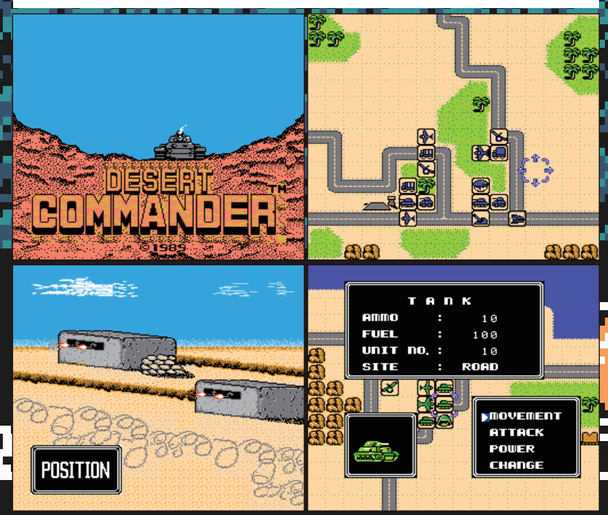
Desert Commander

Genre: Strategy
Release Date: June 1989
Developer: Kemco
Publisher: Kemco
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★



In this turn-based strategy game, you take control of various types of military vehicles in a desert setting with the goal of either totally annihilating your opponent's force or destroying their headquarters. All this takes place in a top-down grid view where you'll move units around the map, one at a time, via a cursor and menu system. Units move differently, with different maximum distances based on their type, and have different attack ranges. Battles take place when two opposing units are within range of each other. Battle results are determined mathematically by the unit types and their advantages over each other, which uses a rock/paper/scissors type mechanic. For example, anti-aircraft guns are effective against bombers, but are also vulnerable versus armored cars. Players may customize their army before the battle, choosing from two air units, two types of cannons, and five land units, with the overall maximum amount dependent upon which battle scenario is selected. In addition to terrain differences that will affect how quickly and if certain units can move, there are various tiles across the map that can be used for battle bonuses and resupply purposes (units require fuel to move and limited ammo must be replenished). Tiles to help with battles include oases and bunkers, while airfields and towns are examples of resupply grid tiles. While the game offers an option to play against the computer in five different scenarios, the AI does not change between them – it simply adds more units depending on the setting. Due to that and the limited number of scenarios, you're likely to have the most fun and challenge playing against another person. Regardless, this title is one of the more unique strategy games on the system without its gameplay becoming overwrought or arcane.

Reflections: Fans of the *Advance Wars* series will find this familiar territory. The first game in that series, the Japan-only *Famicom Wars*, was released only months later (it improves on *Desert Commander* in every conceivable way). These may not have been the first games to make strategic turn-based gameplay work on a console, but they did a lot to... advance it. One other interesting (?) tidbit is that this title had a more overt World War II theme in the Japanese version. The storyline had the armies being led by American general George Patton and German general Erwin Rommel. The only surviving reference to this I can find is the name of the "North African Front" scenario. The Japanese title even translates to *Desert Fox*, which was Rommel's nickname. I'm not sure why the WWII background was stripped from the North American release, but I don't think the prominent swastika on the game box or cartridge did it any favors. – JD



Destination Earthstar

Genre: Shooter, Simulation
Release Date: Feb. 1990
Developer: Imagineering
Publisher: Acclaim Entertainment
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★

This title is a hybrid space-flight simulation and side-scrolling shooter that does neither part very well. Players must fly their ship around in a first-person cockpit view and destroy all the enemies in a sector before attempting to attack that location's base. Each sector is divided into a grid with information icons contained in each square. Reading the map is easy enough and players can quickly warp speed to any grid with fighters. Engaging in combat is rather choppy and tiresome, as players scroll endlessly in various directions trying to get a glimpse, let alone a good shot, at their target. Worse, only the torpedo weapon appears to be of any real use. Players will eventually learn some tricks and proper distancing, but it's not something that makes the game better. The control really hurts here the most, as evasive maneuvers of any sort are basically nonexistent. Once the bases appear, things go from bad to worse. Bases are attacked in a side-scrolling mode that is reminiscent of a horizontal shooter but plays much differently and not in a good way. Instead of free movement, pressing LEFT or RIGHT adjusts the ship's acceleration in far too large of increments, which regularly results in unavoidable collisions. Enemy patterns aren't designed with any thought, and while the cockpit view sections are somewhat redeemable, these are simply throwaway segments. It's a shame the solid idea behind this title didn't materialize into something more playable.

Reflections: I love both game styles this title attempts to pack in, so it's extra annoying to me that a little more quality control and polish weren't given to the game design. An open-ended version of something like this would keep me hooked potentially forever. To be fair, this is definitely one of Acclaim's better attempts on the NES, but by the time the player reaches later, more challenging levels, the controls will have stripped all the fun from the experience. – IF

Destiny of an Emperor

Genre: RPG, Strategy
Release Date: Sept. 1990
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★★

Loosely based upon the novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, which is itself rooted in ancient Chinese history, this strategy RPG tells the story of Liu Bei, a historical figure who, along with his sworn brothers Guan Yu and Zhang Fei, seeks to defend their village from the Yellow Turban, a group of rebels led by the sorcerer Zhang Jiao. The game features an overhead perspective with random turn-based battles. Each character in the party commands their own regiment of soldiers, with the number of soldiers under their command effectively serving as hit points for that character. Along with the generic bandit forces that roam the countryside, the player will also encounter rival generals who may be recruited into the party once defeated. Though 150 characters can potentially join up, only 70 are allowed in the party at one time, and only five characters can be active in battle, with two in reserve, one of which is a tactician who provides the group with offensive, defensive, or healing magic. The player is responsible for outfitting the party with weapons and armor, along with food which can be purchased in the various towns throughout the game. A variety of options are available in combat, allowing players to choose individual targets or go "All-Out," which gives control over to the AI and speeds up the battle. The game also features a branching storyline with alternate paths to choose from, giving it an extra level of depth. The control is spot-on, the music is catchy, and the graphics are both bold and bright, a trademark of all Capcom games. A surprisingly fun RPG.

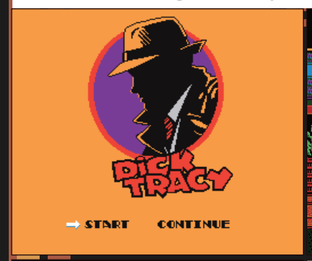
Reflections: A largely overlooked game in the NES era, *Destiny of an Emperor* turned out to be much better than I expected. Of course, the graphics and gameplay are very reminiscent of *Dragon Warrior*, which I found endearing right from the start. I also like the idea of being able to recruit enemy troops, as well as the multiple paths through the story. While it doesn't exactly revolutionize the genre in any way, it does enough to keep the game interesting. – JP

Dick Tracy

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: Aug. 1990
Developer: Realtime Associates
Publisher: Bandai
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

Don the yellow trenchcoat of law and order to lock up Big Boy and his gang of mobsters in this combined action-platformer and top-down driving game. There are five cases to crack, each containing faithful characters from Tracy lore including the Rodent, Breathless Mahoney, Shoulders, and more. The player walks the beat inspecting the clues in the notepad, which pertain to the suspect in question. A quick glance over to the mugshots screen shows where the criminal was last seen. Tracy then hits the streets in an awkward (at first) top-down driving simulator through the city. The cop car slides around the streets and clips itself to the road in an on-rails fashion, which is immediately jarring but doesn't become an issue. Snipers adorn the rooftops as Tracy travels to each locale, which can become frustrating as they are so tiny to make out. The player, however, can get out of the car and shoot them with a little timing and patience. On reaching a location, the game switches to side-on action where Tracy must reach a clue or interrogate a suspect. The characters are all sadly identical to each other, especially when considering the grotesque and interesting villains available, but the stages are colorful and the sprites well animated. The music plays a small part in adding to the atmosphere with its jazzy plinks and plonks but soon becomes tiresome. Tracy is armed with a pistol and his fists but is unable to shoot unarmed goons, so switching between them adds strategy to the detriment of the pacing of the action. If an unarmed hood is shot, then the player loses health from their only life. To assist on the beat are a few underwhelming power-ups such as a boxing glove which knocks enemies all over the screen and also Tracy's iconic Tommy Gun, which doesn't add much else from the pistol. Upon finding the clue, it is back to the streets to go to the next location. Only when each of the five clues have been found can Tracy make a bust. Visiting a police station or finding stingily placed health kits return much needed health, as the difficulty is merciless. Rushing through will cause certain death, as a stop-start mantra must be used at all times, which makes a potentially fun and different game a chore.

Reflections: When every other NES title was a simple side-scroller, this had collecting clues, interrogating suspects, open-world-type exploration around a map screen, and a solid license to boot, but the sum of its parts just don't equate to anything meaty. Add in the frustration of the insane difficulty and only one life and the rot sets in quite quickly. If you manage to crack the first case, at least there is a continue password to use so you aren't going to the '5th & B Flophouse' for the billionth time. Sadly this falls Flattop. Stick to *The Untouchables* or *Miami Vice* (Commodore 64) for similar games that do the crime mob genre more justice.– JE

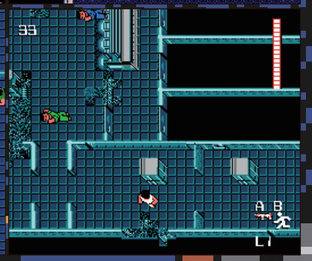


Die Hard

Genre: Run and Gun Shooter
Release Date: Jan. 1992
Developer: Pack-In-Video
Publisher: Activision
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★

In this overhead shooter based on the 1988 film, players must guide New York City cop John McClane on a mission to free a group of hostages from the nefarious Hans Gruber, whose henchmen have taken over Nakatomi Plaza. Options include a Beginner or Advanced mode, the latter of which increases the difficulty and starts the game on a random floor. The game is mostly nonlinear, allowing players to freely explore the building's several floors and roof via elevators, stairwells and even air ducts. Floors contains various rooms and offices, with some destructible objects, like vending machines and glass walls/windows. McClane starts with a pistol and a small amount of ammunition, but will acquire more weapons and ammo as he progresses. These include a submachine gun, C-4 explosives, and flash bang grenades to stun enemies. The objective is to dispatch all enemies across the various floors and access the 30th floor before Hans can escape, with a series of locks on the status screen serving as an in-game timer lasting about 24 minutes. Along with the standard life meter, which is restored by collecting soda cans, McClane also has a Foot Meter which determines his walking speed. This will gradually decrease while running or stepping on broken glass, but can be replenished with first aid kits. A radio can also be obtained to get updates on enemy movement. The game features cinematic cutscenes inspired by the film, with multiple endings depending on the player's actions, some of which are optional. Unfortunately, the enemy AI is perhaps a bit too complex, especially since the player has only one life and no continues. Enemies will often fire and retreat at will, making it very difficult to hit them without taking lots of damage. Furthermore, the player's view is restricted by a "fog of war," and this makes it difficult to anticipate enemies, especially around blind corners, leaving the player vulnerable to sneak attacks. There are some issues, and it's very difficult, but fans of the film may appreciate its faithfulness.

Reflections: As a movie-licensed game, *Die Hard* is certainly not the worst I've ever played, but it is made almost unfairly difficult with enemies who can fire and retreat off screen, leaving you to negotiate the hail of bullets they leave behind. Health items are also far too few, especially in the early going when you're struggling just to survive. Overall, it's a great movie that deserved a better NES game. – JP



Dig Dug II

Genre: Action
Release Date: Dec. 1989
Developer: Namco
Publisher: Bandai
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

Help Taizo Hori clear islands of pesky Pookas and Fygars in this top-down single-screen sequel that deviates quite a bit from the original Namco classic. Taizo has control of his standard pump from the first game and can dispatch enemies by inflating them until they pop. This time around, there is a new drill weapon that is much more satisfying and tricky to use. When certain spots on the playfield are bored into, they create fissures in the ground. When a connecting line of fissures runs from water to water, the entire chunk of island will sink and take all of the enemies with it for massive points. Beware, as Taizo can find himself on the wrong side of this equation quite easily! Defeating all the enemies allows the player to proceed to the next island. As players progress, the islands and the fault lines become much more puzzle oriented, while the number and aggression of the enemies increases, making taking them head-on less of an option. Music is standard and graphics are cute but basic, just about right for an arcade title of the time. While Namco generally played things safe with many sequels, it's refreshing to see them try something different with this sequel and succeed. Easily suggested for arcade heads.

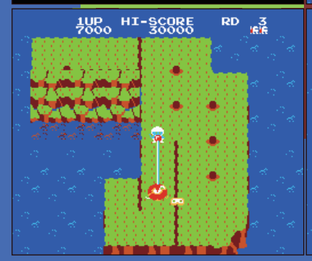
Reflections: One of the more darkly humorous things I've ever seen in a game is the way the last couple enemies in a level will throw themselves off the island and take their own lives rather than let you earn any points if you don't act quickly. – IF

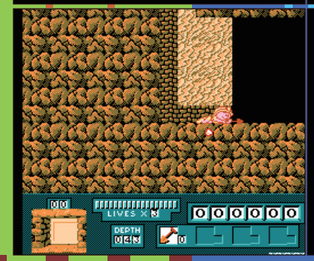
Digger T. Rock: The Legend of the Lost City

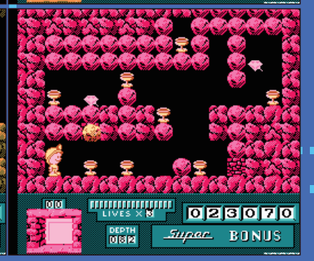
Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Dec. 1990
Developer: Rare
Publisher: Milton Bradley
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

The player takes control of the miner Digger T. Rock. Players must dig and explore through various cavernous levels in search of the exit while collecting jewels and avoiding harassing underground foes. Digger's shovel is used to smack enemies and for digging through the sand/dirt which can be traveled through. Besides enemies, the levels are perilous with obstacles and dangerous drops. Items such as dynamite and rope ladders can be found and used to assist in navigating the levels. Digger can move about pretty well via jumping, crawling, digging, climbing, etc. These are all animated excellently, as is the death animation when Digger bites it. The well-done cartoonish style and graphics belie the very challenging gameplay that players will encounter. Secret passages and items can be revealed only by hitting your shovel against random stones and rock walls. There is a one minute time limit to escape through the exit door as well once it's triggered, which can be tough, especially with the constantly respawning enemies. This high level of difficulty unfortunately negates some of the fun factor.

Reflections: This was seemingly an unofficial sequel/followup to the classic PC game *Digger*. Besides the name of the character, the sound when you collect a jewel in this game is very similar, as are the gameplay mechanics involved in dropping rocks on enemies (or yourself). And here I thought playing a 5.25-inch floppy disk with pirated computer games when I was five years old would never pay off in the future! – PC







Dirty Harry

Genre: Action
Release Date: Dec. 1990
Developer: Gray Matter
Publisher: Mindscape
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★

"Dirty Harry" Callahan takes to the streets to rid them of drugs and battle through three levels of action. Harry is armed with his fists, feet, and his famous .44 Magnum handgun to take out thugs who will shoot at Harry, swing bats, and throw dynamite/bricks. Stages are side-scrolling and the first is nonlinear, as the player can duck in and out of buildings to travel to other parts of the level via connecting hallways and doors. It's obtuse and not really fun to explore. The buildings contain various rooms where desks/crates can be destroyed with a kick to reveal gun ammunition, chili dogs for health, and various other weapons and items. The second and third levels are shorter and more linear, a far cry from the first. Controls are precise in some ways but clunky in others. Aiming with the gun is nice, and the firing even has a recoil. However, jumping is awkward and the punching/kicking is imprecise with enemies and has to be done at just the right distance. The action would be somewhat enjoyable if it wasn't for the fact that enemies not only regenerate, but come at the player at an almost constant rate. Having very limited ammo makes the gameplay frustrating, as using fists means being overpowered fairly easily. There are unlimited continues, but the game isn't inviting enough to want to utilize them.

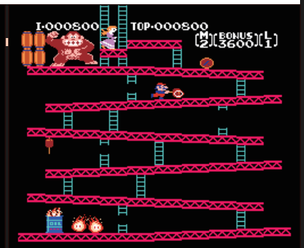
Reflections: The game starts with the famous Dirty Harry line "Go ahead, make my day" from the film *Sudden Impact*. This unfortunately is the biggest highlight. The structure of this game is strange as the first level is long, sprawling, nonlinear, and requires lots of exploration to find your way and gain items. The second and third levels, however, are shorter and straightforward. It's almost as if the developer realized the first level was waaaay too involved, so they dialed back the last levels to make it simpler (both for them and potential players). The artwork in the manual is absolutely hilarious, as it's black and white, simple, and looks like what a talented 13-year-old would draw during English class in middle school. After the last boss is defeated (who bears more than a passing resemblance to Marvel Comics villain Kingpin), Harry repeats his famous "Did he fire six shots or only five?" speech from the *Dirty Harry* film. It's surprising to hear, technically impressive for the NES, and probably where most of the memory for the game went. – PC

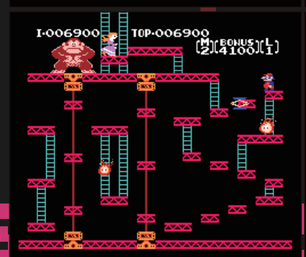
Donkey Kong

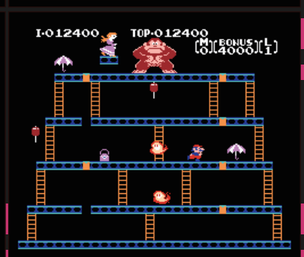
Genre: Platformer
Release Date: June 1986
Developer: Nintendo R&D1
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

This adaptation of the groundbreaking arcade game stars Jumpman (Mario) on his quest to save his girlfriend Pauline from his pet gorilla. It's a challenging single screen platformer game that requires Mario to accomplish different tasks while avoiding the obstacles and enemies. The first and second screens have the player maneuver up construction sites to get to Donkey Kong by running, jumping, using platforms/elevators, and climbing ladders. Obstacles will be hurled at Mario by Donkey Kong above, including the iconic barrels on the first stage and springs in the second. The third screen has Mario running over rivets from a building site to remove them to bring Donkey Kong falling down. Avoidance is the name of the game, but mallets can be picked up on the first and third levels to take out the barrels, ghosts, and flame enemies. Upon completing the third level, the screens will cycle through again at a higher difficulty until the player loses all their lives. On the surface it's simple, but the gameplay is fun, addicting, and requires razor sharp reflexes and timing to be successful. It's also the first video game to feature real characters that are involved in a narrative story. It's a competent port of a revolutionary game that unfortunately does not include one of the arcade levels (cement factory), which hurts this otherwise nice title a bit.

Reflections: Ah, *Donkey Kong*, one of my favorite classic arcade games. Developed by a young developer named Shigeru Miyamoto alongside Gunpei Yokoi, it introduced and spawned not just a successful trilogy of arcade games, but also the biggest character/franchise in video game history in the still-to-be-named Mario. There's just a magical combination of gameplay, sound effects, and fun characters that set *Donkey Kong* apart from the other arcade games at the time (mostly space shooters and maze games) and made it a huge arcade smash. I don't remember the first time I played it, but whenever I see the arcade game around I just have to drop a quarter in and pay my respects. It is a strange premise, though. Besides not being a very smart idea, I'm not sure it's legal in most states to own an 800 pound pet gorilla. I always wondered what happened to Pauline. After *Super Mario Bros.*, I guess she was old hat after Princess Toadstool showed up. It was nice to see the ol' gal recover and rise up to become the mayor of New Donk City in *Super Mario Odyssey* on the Switch. – PC





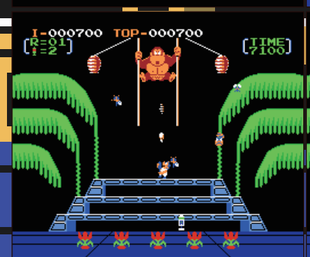


Donkey Kong 3

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: June 1986
Developer: Nintendo R&D1
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

The player takes control of Stanley the exterminator who must deal with Donkey Kong and prevent flying insects from stealing his flowers. Donkey Kong starts at the top of the screen, suspended on vines alongside beehives, from which bees will swarm. Stanley can jump around on platforms on the single-screen levels and fire his bug spray only vertically to kill the bees and also spray Donkey Kong's buttocks to prevent him from climbing down off the vines. If Donkey Kong falls off and reaches the ground, it will cost the player a life. Levels are completed either by destroying all of the insects or by forcing Donkey Kong up to the top of the vines until he climbs up and away. Saved flowers result in bonus points. Besides flying bees, there are crawling snakes who can block Stanley's spray and make it a little tougher for the player. Players can sometimes get a more powerful spray to more easily take out the bugs and drive Donkey Kong up the vines. It's a simple but flawed game. Stanley's inability to fire at more than one angle and jump quickly down to a lower platform makes dealing with surrounding flying insects very difficult to survive. Unless you're an expert player, the game's difficulty soon squashes any semblance of fun after the first several relatively easy rounds are finished.

Reflections: Stanley has been relegated to the Nintendo garbage bin as a mascot. After this game, our exterminator friend would never star in another Nintendo game again. I'm not sure why Nintendo veered so far from the gameplay elements that made the first two games of the series so successful in the first place. I understand taking creative risks, but this game was so far removed from the others that I still scratch my head today when I think about it. OK, it's not a literal scratch. If that was the case I'd need Stanley to come over and spray at whatever was crawling around on my noggin. – PC



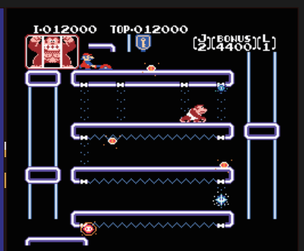
Donkey Kong Classics

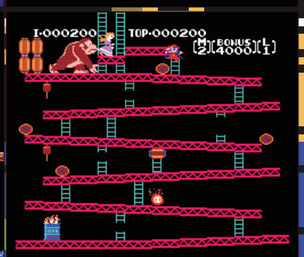
Genre: Compilation, Platformer
Release Date: Oct. 1988
Developer: Nintendo R&D1
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
N/R

This compilation cart consists of both *Donkey Kong* and *Donkey Kong Jr.*, which are available to play via a simple menu when the game is powered on. Please see the individual game reviews for more details on the two classic games.

Reflections: Along with *Anticipation*, *Donkey Kong Classics* has the strange distinction and honor of having a licensed cart without the Nintendo Seal of Quality present on the label.

After production stopped on *Donkey Kong* and *Donkey Kong Jr.*, Nintendo released this cartridge to replace them. This compilation is somewhat easier to find than the individual games. For some reason, though, both *Donkey Kong 3* and *Donkey Kong Jr. Math* are not included. I'm guessing Nintendo didn't consider spraying insecticide up butts and awkward vine mathematics classic enough to be included on a cartridge re-release. Also, Nintendo never put the cement factory stage back into their *Donkey Kong* port. Why do you play with my heart like so, Nintendo? Why? – PC



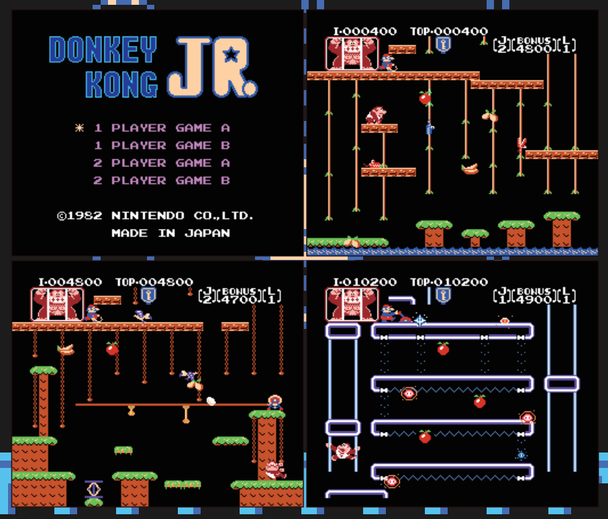


Donkey Kong Jr.

Genre: Platformer
Release Date: June 1986
Developer: Nintendo R&D1
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★⋆

In this sequel to the arcade smash, players take control of Donkey Kong's son in order to save his father from the villainous Mario who has captured him. The first three single-screen stages consist of Jr. having to traverse them horizontally and vertically in a variety of ways in order to reach a key near the caged Donkey Kong. The first screen has Jr. traversing jungle platforms by walking, jumping, and climbing/sliding up and down vines while avoiding mechanical "snapjaws." The second stage adds a spring and moving ropes for Jr. to grab while birds attack. The third stage has Jr. trying to avoid deadly sparks around live circuits, while the final stage has Jr. avoiding birds while having to climb chains in order to push six keys into the cage at the top to unlock Donkey Kong. The levels then repeat with higher difficulty. The action may seem simple on the surface, but every step and jump taken must be very precise and calculated, and an equal amount of both patience and urgent/quick movements is essential in completing the stages while avoiding death. The key to success is also being able to smoothly transition from one form of movement to another and back again. It's an early and great example of unique platforming action with multiple ways of maneuvering on display, which helped firmly ground and expand the platforming genre.

Reflections: For a "classic" arcade game, *Donkey Kong Jr.* is arguably one of the most important. While its predecessor helped to establish narrative storytelling in gaming and standardize platforming action, *Jr.* pushed the genre forward while also presenting a sequel that was very different and a step up from the original in adding the climbing and mechanical elements. This helped establish and popularize more than simply running and jumping in platform games. For all these reasons, plus the fact that we see the beloved icon Mario as a villain, *Donkey Kong Jr.* is one my favorite pre-NES-era video games. – PC

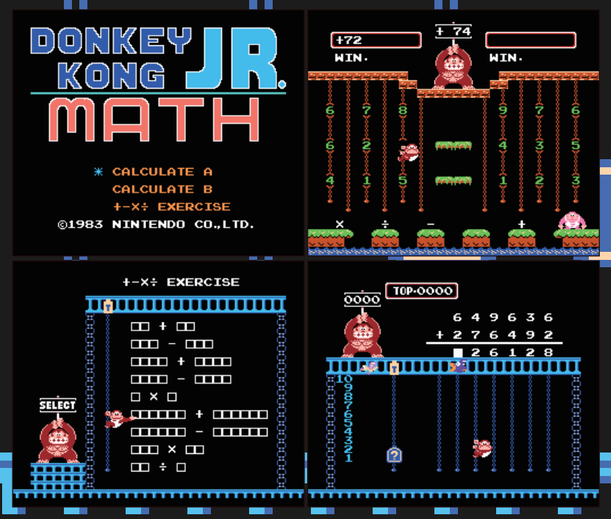


Donkey Kong Jr. Math

Genre: Educational
Release Date: June 1986
Developer: Nintendo R&D2
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★

Taking control of Donkey Kong Jr., players perform simple arithmetic to learn and practice math. Game modes A and B consist of easy and harder problems where Donkey Kong holds a number on the top of the screen. The numbers 1-9 appear on chains and addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division signs are on island platforms on the bottoms of the screen. Players are tasked to use the numbers and add/multiply/subtract to get to the target number. They can do this by using Junior to jump and traverse the chains/platforms and touch the numbers/signs to activate them to perform the arithmetic and come to a total. The player can then perform another function to add to or subtract from the current total. When the target number is reached, the player is presented with a new one to solve. It's a very rudimentary game with no other objective or structure, with the only difference in gameplay possible via an optional second player racing to the same number goal. A third game mode has the player directly solve math problems by climbing up chains to select the correct numbers to answer them. While it may be a little helpful in learning arithmetic, the experience is shallow and not too interesting as an actual game.

Reflections: *Donkey Kong Jr. Math* didn't sell too well. In fact, it was the sole educational "black box" game and the last real educational title Nintendo published on the system. I remember only a single person who owned this game, my friend Joey. Joey was great in sports, but he did struggle a little on mathematics. Apparently, jumping around on chains and touching numbers doesn't significantly affect your ability to do long division. – PC



Double Dare

Genre: Game Show, Action
Release Date: Apr. 1990
Developer: Rare
Publisher: GameTek
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★⋆

In this conversion of the popular and quite messy game show, two teams of two players go head-to-head answering trivia questions for cash. The catch is that if the active team doesn't know or doesn't think their opponents know the answer, they can dare the other team to answer for double points. If the second team dares back, then the first team has to answer or take the physical challenge option. In the show, these physical challenges were creative and messy little games such as popping liquid-filled balloons with one's head to fill containers. These translate very poorly to the NES version, with most being boring target-hitting games utilizing timing based meters to determine distance or arcs of a toss. This eliminates the frantic action of the original show, and most importantly, the challenges are simply boring to play. Additionally, the computer will win these way too quickly, and if playing against another human, they often feel like random luck. The winner of these challenges earns more money for their team. The winning pair will get to run through the obstacle course, the centerpiece, in an attempt to win prizes by grabbing flags from unique mini-challenges like rooting through a giant nose. Sadly, perhaps predictably, this doesn't translate at all and is simply an annoying exercise in button mashing to proceed through each uninspired segment. It's a real shame, as the show could have been a great fit for a video game with some more thought put into the areas that actually caused people to tune into the television show.

Reflections: I freaking love *Double Dare*. It was the first, and one of very few, shows that I can remember rushing home to watch from wherever I was as a kid. All my friends and I would skip the trivia and spend entire days outside creating obstacle courses and inventing physical challenges. I doubt it was the show's intention, but this one half hour of programming was the catalyst for much of my physical activity between the ages of 7-10. – IF

Double Dragon

Genre: Beat 'em Up
Release Date: June 1988
Developer: Technōs Japan
Publisher: Tradewest
Players: 1-2 (alternating, simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★⋆

Players take control of Billy Lee in this port of the hit arcade brawling game. Players are tasked to take down street thugs with punches, kicks, and weapons such as bats, barrels, and knives that can be picked up. In a change from the arcade game, you can upgrade your attack repertoire with elbows, throws, pin-down attacks, jump kicks, etc., via a rudimentary RPG leveling-up system. When players beat on enemies, they gain points, and at certain invervals hearts will be gained, indicating acquisiting of a new attack. Gameplay is smooth, fast, and exciting as you face various enemy types from the arcade game, like the whip-wielding Linda and the giant, ugly Abobo. The game suffers a bit from awkward, unnecessary platforming sections and the fact that the NES could only handle two enemies on the screen at the same time (and of the same type to boot). The other huge drawback is that the two-player simultaneous mode that made the arcade version a blast is absent here. However, as a small consolation you can face a friend in a one-on-one battle in Mode B (using the same fighters). It's a competent and fine port of the arcade hit, if a bit lacking in the full translation.

Reflections: *Double Dragon* was one of the first arcade games I fell in love with. I almost wish I had never played it, since if had I not, I would have loved the NES game a lot more than I did as a kid. My friend Kevin owned the game, and all I could do the entire time while playing it was compare it and its shortcomings to my beloved arcade version. I didn't like the RPG element of having to earn better moves, because let's face it, if you don't know how to do a jump kick, it's not like you will automatically learn how to on the streets after you fight a certain number of thugs and S&M-clad women. Trust me, I've tried. Still can't do one. – PC

Double Dragon II: The Revenge

Genre: Beat 'em Up
Release Date: Jan. 1990
Developer: Technōs Japan
Publisher: Acclaim Entertainment
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★★½

In this side-scrolling beat 'em up, Billy and Jimmy must avenge the death of Marian as they chase the culprits through city streets, rooftops, and even helicopters. The B button and A buttons attack left/right respectively, with a punch towards the direction the player is facing and a kick behind the player (which helps get out of tight spots). Getting used to this control scheme is a little tricky at first, but in no time the player will be handling groups of thugs with confidence. There are some new additions such as grabs and spin kicks. Grabs act as a grapple and the move performed changes with the directional input, from knees to a back toss. The spin kick, effective at dealing with stronger enemies, is a bit trickier to pull off, requiring precise timing at the very apex of a jump. Old mechanics return as well, such as being able to pick up a foe's fallen weapon and use it to increase your damage output. Occasionally, the game leaves its familiar isometric view to put the player on a strict 2D plane or integrate platforming elements. The game does falter here, as jumping with A plus B is not ideal, and certain jumps are very difficult to line up. Two-player simultaneous mode is present in this version and increases the fun by magnitudes. Whether solo or with a pal, this is one of the best experiences on the system and easy to recommend.

Reflections: Nintendo took issue with crosses on gravestones in the *DuckTales* prototype yet was completely okay with an action game in which a girl gets murdered in the attract mode? They sure did walk on eggshells when it came to religious iconography. It might seem odd to some readers, but in the '80s and early '90s that sort of thing would get you in hot water way quicker than good old-fashioned violence. – IF

I was somewhat disappointed by the NES release of *Double Dragon*, but the sequel swooped in and saved the day, thanks to much improved graphics and the two-player simultaneous action. It's a pretty violent premise – you're not trying to save the girl, SHE'S ALREADY BEEN SHOT IN THE FACE. I guess that wouldn't have made for acceptable cover art. – PC

Double Dragon III: The Sacred Stones

Genre: Beat 'em Up
Release Date: Feb. 1991
Developer: Technōs Japan
Publisher: Acclaim Entertainment
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

Billy and Jimmy Lee must track down Sacred Stones in order to save Marion in the third beat 'em up in the series. Like previous installments, players must use punches, kicks, jump kicks, and weapons to attack enemy thugs. Controls feel responsive, and attacks are well animated and feel substantial. The biggest difference between previous entries is the ability to switch off to two other characters, which you can do after you defeat them as bosses in the game. Besides the standard weapons (knife, broken bottle, sai) that can be retrieved from enemies and used, players are also given limited use of a unique and powerful weapon via the selection screen. It's a very well-polished game, but the extreme difficulty is a major blow. Enemies attack with adeptness, usually don't give you respite if you are knocked down by them, and don't allow you to easily defeat them. On top of that, the player is only given a single life and no continues in the game (for the first few levels). This imbalance makes the game an absolute chore to play. Avoidance of this title for one of the previous two iterations is probably the proper choice for most.

Reflections: There are some NES games that get a bad rap from people in the modern era, and *Double Dragon III* is one of them. Unlike some of the others though, the vitriol for this title is rightfully deserved. Perhaps it is because unlike other bad games, this one is from a storied and classic franchise with two enjoyable games that came before it. It's technically sound, but awful design decisions made it fall well short of the mark, and that's probably what hurts gamers much more than a bad one-off game from a company with a poor reputation to begin with. – PC

Double Dribble

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Sept. 1987
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Konami
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★

This was the first basketball game released on the NES, which was ported from the arcade. Players choose their team (only difference is uniform color), difficulty, and length of time for the periods, and then it's time to hit the horizontal court. This fun, arcade-style basketball experience is fast-paced with jump shots, passing, blocking, and stealing. On offense, B makes the player jump and A passes. On defense, B changes the defensive player to the one nearest to the ball, and A attempts to steal the ball or attempt a block when the opposing player shoots. The gameplay is a little strange, like being able to jump very far and change direction while in the air for a shot. One of the main highlights are the short slam dunk cutaway scenes where you may or may not be successful. Other quirks (such as spots on the court where you can almost always score) make this game amusing to play, but it's definitely not a simulation experience. Two-player action is pretty good, and the sound effects and music compliment the game well. However, this single game experience offers nothing more than a quick basketball jaunt. It's definitely not sophisticated, but it's not without its charm and is buoyed a bit by some nice sound effects and music.

Reflections: Having owned this game as a kid, the "buhnk buhnk" sound of the constant dribbling will be in my head forever. I get a kick out of the different team mascots during half-time and the fact that they cut the National Anthem short in the intro (for whatever reason). I used to kick the crap out of my dad at this game when we played way back when. He would often throw the controller across the room in anger as I was beating him by 30 points. I guess he didn't have the proper "ups." – PC

This has an absolutely stirring rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner." Everyone, please rise. – IF

Double Strike

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: 1990
Developer: Sachen
Publisher: American Video Entertainment
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★

Players take control of a propeller jet and battle terrorists of DAMED (Destructive Armed Militant Enemy Devotee) in this uninteresting horizontal shooter. Players shoot down enemy planes and take out ground targets. Power-ups can be collected from destroyed pink planes and include a double shot, spread fire, rapid fire, and the ability to drop bombs. Gameplay is smooth but bland, with the only real challenge presented from the high number of enemy projectiles that will fill the screen. Graphics are mediocre, and the enemy design is beyond rote. Nothing really stands out about this title save for the scrolling, big boss battles (large plane, enemy base, battleship, etc.) and maybe some nice foreground scrolling effects. There's also a two-player simultaneous mode – although finding a buddy to take to the uninteresting skies with you here might be tough.

Reflections: I understand that *Double Strike* is fine on a technical level, but on the creative side there is really nothing going on. For AVE, that may be above par, but on the NES curve, it's still below average. This game takes place in the South Pacific, yet one of the boss battles has the player taking on a castle with a backwards swastika. Way to try and be edgy, AVE. – PC

Dr. Chaos

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: Nov. 1988
Developer: Marionette
Publisher: FCI
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⋆

In this adventure title, Michael steps into a house to rescue his brother, Dr. Chaos, and must find and combine 10 parts of the Restored Laser to take on Canbarian. Armed with a knife by default, the player begins in a side-scrolling house area with lots of rooms that can be entered. Standard enemies include bats and mice that respawn. If players enter rooms, the gameplay changes to a first-person mode where the player can move in all four directions and has commands to HIT, OPEN, and GET. Players may open doors and windows that may possibly be entered, and open doors and closets to possibly reveal capsules to restore energy as well as grenades, handgun ammo, and machine gun ammo. The hit function is useful for knocking open some pieces of furniture and revealing items, or for hitting holes in walls to reveal warp zone ladders/entrances. Players can also reveal monsters every now and then, who the players will have to defeat outside in the hallway before being able to re-enter any room. Finding the "warp zones" in rooms and entering them constitute the meat of the gameplay experience. In these warp levels, players will side-scroll and take on generic baddies like skulls and skeletons while also trying to find three power-up items. After defeating the stage boss, players will receive one of the 10 Restored Laser pieces. They will then have to back out and find another warp zone in the house. Controls are smooth, and switching between weapons via the Select button and using them is easy. Graphically, the game is fairly simple but accomplishes the job. The enjoyment factor here boils down to how much you like maneuvering around and trying to open every door and hit every wall while attempting to find the warp zones. Some may tolerate it, but for others, the average action on display may not justify the effort.

Reflections: Dr. Chaos is Michael's brother, making his name Michael Chaos, which is a kick ass name. The first time playing this game, I stumbled upon the Big Lady monster in one of the rooms. It was terrifying, as she quickly mauled me and ended my life before I really had a chance to react. You can check out a clip of this online, which took place during the first charity NES Marathon. – PC

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde

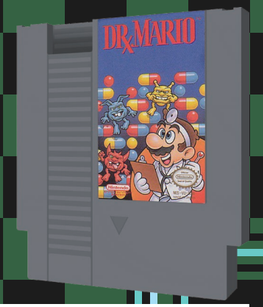
Genre: Action
Release Date: Apr. 1989
Developer: Advance Communication
Publisher: Bandai
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★

Players control Dr. Jekyll of story fame in this side-scroller who has to travel across six stages in order to reach the chapel for his wedding. Dr. Jekyll will encounter many nuisances along the way. Some include children who will fire slingshots, annoying singers, cats, dogs, birds who drop poop, bugs, and a man who will leave exploding bombs behind. The player has to slowly walk along the levels somehow avoiding these antagonists, with a cane to push away enemies, which works for very few. When bumping into enemies, the doctor's health bar will decrease, but more importantly the stress meter will move towards the "H," which stands for Mr. Hyde, the evil version of Dr. Jekyll. When this occurs, The doctor will transform into Hyde, and the gameplay will also change to an auto-scrolling right-to-left mode, where Hyde has to battle demons via a punch or the "Psycho-Wave" projectile attack. If Hyde loses all his lives in this mode, the game ends. Likewise, the game will end via a bolt of lightning if Hyde is allowed to advance to the left back to where Jekyll was at the start of the level. Hyde can only transform back into Jekyll to continue the stage by destroying enough bouncing brains called "Shepps" to swing the stress meter back to Jekyll. It's a strange gameplay dynamic, and a very frustrating one, since it's very difficult to keep Dr. Jekyll's stress meter up, due to the cumbersome and slow controls. It's a somewhat ambitious title but bizarre in its design and execution.

Reflections: Usually heralded as one of the worst NES games, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* has a bad reputation due to many players failing to understand the core gameplay mechanics. That's not to say that this would result in something very enjoyable anyway. The developers were trying to adapt a 19th century English novel that was an allegory for the dichotomy of man's nature of good versus evil. How this was supposed to be faithfully translated into an NES game is anyone's real guess, but the developers at least gave it a nice try, even if the results were lackluster and puzzling. I think that the main confusion and consternation regarding this title is the fact that it can end so quickly and almost on a whim with no warning. That is perhaps the most glaring flaw of the game – a lack of a second chance via multiple lives. Then again, as in life itself, we usually only get one chance when choosing the righteous path versus an evil one. Maybe this is what the developers were in fact striving for? There could be some brilliance here in this title after all. – PC

Dr. Mario

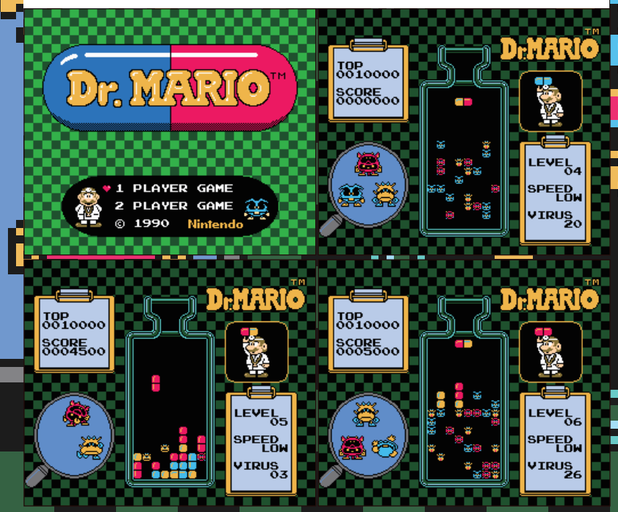
Genre: Puzzle
Release Date: Oct. 1990
Developer: Nintendo R&D1
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★★⋆



In this clever puzzle game, players must eliminate viruses from the bin by stacking like-colored pills on top of them. Pills are thrown by Dr. Mario (complete with snappy white jacket) into a pill shaped bin, where they slowly fall to the bottom. Players may rotate these pills clockwise or counterclockwise. Each pill has two colored halves, and those same colored halves must be matched with multiple, different colored viruses dotted throughout the playfield. When four of the same color pill halves and/or like-colored viruses line up either horizontally or vertically, those halves/viruses are eliminated. Chains can be created by eliminating only one half of a pill's color, which can drop the unused pill part(s), causing them to fall and stack on other pills or viruses. Clearing the bin of viruses progresses to the next stage with more virus critters and faster-falling pills. Groovy music and pleasant graphics add to the charm. Two-player mode is loads of fun and can get quite vicious, as eliminating pills/viruses from one's own bin sends trouble over to your opponent's side. Chaining is particularly important here, as the more viruses are eliminated, the bigger the attack on the opponent. If ever a game could make a trip to the doctor's office seem charming, it would certainly be this very appealing title.

Reflections: I used to play this with my old roommate all the time. She would consistently destroy me but I always had a blast. One night, after losing about 15 games in a row, I paused our current game and stood up to use the bathroom. I tripped on the cord and reset the NES, which she immediately accused me of doing on purpose. It was a joke but we never played again. After months of miserable losing, it was simply no longer fun for her to beat me every game. – IF

I never was into this game as a kid. I wasn't big on puzzle games, and I thought it was strange that the viruses and pills could just suspend magically inside the bottle. I've come to appreciate it more in my older age. However, the commercial with the song: "Mario, oooooh, he's got the cure!" never gets old. And then of course there is the separate bizarre headshrinker commercial – the less said about that one the better. – PC



Dragon Fighter

Genre: Action-Platformer, Shooter
Release Date: Jan. 1992
Developer: Natsume
Publisher: SOFEL
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Rare
★★★★

Players take control of a human fighter who can also transform into a dragon in this side-scrolling action title. The player is armed with a sword which can also be charged up for a projectile attack. Besides a health meter, the player has a "metamorphosis" gauge which increases with each enemy killed. If it's at least half way filled, the player has the option of transforming into a dragon at any time, which will change the game into a shooter of sorts, as it attacks with one of three different projectiles (based upon power-ups found). The metamorphosis meter will deplete while transformed into a dragon, but players can transform back at any time. This dynamic makes gameplay very interesting, as players will have to decide when to save their meter and risk being overpowered in human form. If there's any fault, it's the challenge – you only get one life, one continue, and energy potions are few and far between. The difficulty may be off-putting to some, but excellent music, sound effects, good graphics/animation and beautiful stage backgrounds round out a very good and well-produced game.

Reflections: *Dragon Fighter* is one of those titles that unfortunately 99 percent of gamers have never heard of due to its rarity and lack of publicity, and that's a shame. I might not have ever played it if it wasn't for the charity NES marathons Ian and I put on. It's definitely a title to check out, if you can get ahold of a copy. So hit the flea markets and watch out for game scalpers! SOFEL didn't pay me to write this review, but I won't turn down a check just in case! – PC

Dragon Power

***Dragon Ball** (PAL)*
Genre: Action
Release Date: Mar. 1988
Developer: TOSE
Publisher: Bandai
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★½

Martial artist Goku and friend Nora set out to find seven crystal balls to be granted a wish by the Dragon Emperor in this action title. The majority of the action takes place in an overhead perspective, where Goku must travel along and fight off numerous cartoony enemies. Armed originally with a punch and jump kick, Goku can collect power-up capsules from defeated enemies or by entering unmarked caves and huts. Inside these capsules are points, a pole for attacking, a special wave attack, limited quickness, and extra health. Finding health is essential, since not only can Goku get damaged multiple times quickly with no respite by enemies, but the health meter is constantly winding down, acting as a timer as well. A scarce amount of health items results in a somewhat high degree of difficulty, even if continuing is an option (starting again at the beginning of the stage). Intertwined with the overhead sections are side-scrolling ones which fare worse. These usually consist of single screens where Goku either has to capture an object or defeat an opponent in a one-on-one fight. Unfortunately, the hit detection is not the greatest in these sections, which makes them more of a chore to get through between the better overhead ones. Although the graphics aren't fantastic, the presentation here is very good, with varied level environments, fun-looking enemies, and a quirky story propelled by humorous dialog cutscenes between Goku, Nora, and the cast of characters found throughout the way. There's a treat of a game here, if you can look a little under the surface and give it a chance.

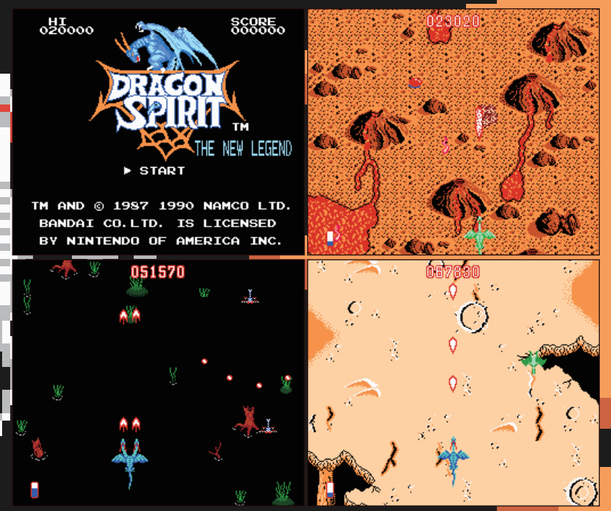
Reflections: Originally released on the Famicom as a game based upon the *Dragon Ball* manga series in Japan, the North American version made alterations (including cutting out portions of the game) in order to remove any mention at all of the manga the game was originally based on. Goku's sprite was even changed from a human to something resembling a monkey. Why was this done? Was it copyright issues? Was it the fact that no one in the United States knew or cared about *Dragon Ball*? Did Bandai think monkeys were more marketable as a main character in North America? Were they big fans of *Lancelot Link, Secret Chimp*? – PC

Dragon Spirit: The New Legend

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: June 1990
Developer: Namco
Ported by: Now Production
Publisher: Bandai
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

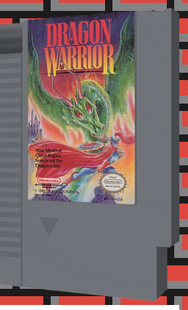
Players take control of a magical dragon to rescue Princess Alicia from a serpent demon in this vertical shooter. Gameplay consists of the dragon firing in the air at enemies or ground targets like dinosaurs who can attack back. The enemies aren't the most interesting, but their nice movement and firing patterns make it engaging. Players must also be on the lookout for environmental hazards, such as pillars or enemies that spread out a cob-web type of substance that can be run into. By destroying eggs on the ground or certain enemies, players can try for power-ups. These include increasing the speed of the dragon, increasing the rate of dragon fire, spread fire, adding mini-dragon wingmen, and even adding up to two extra dragon heads onto your flyer. Power-ups act as a health bar of sorts (bottom left of the screen), with the dragon de-powered with every hit. As far as shooters go, the controls are very smooth and the action flows well, with the player having to switch between attacking air and ground targets frequently. The game is challenging but fair, as players will be on their toes constantly. Graphics are above average with minimal slowdown, with the highlight being the large stage bosses. Some nice cartoon cutscenes explaining the story progression between the stages round out a fine shooter.

Reflections: One of the most intriguing parts of this game is that it begins with a short prologue stage that the player must complete before the main game begins. It's designed as a bridge between the arcade game and this sequel. It's really cool to see and it's a shame that it's rarely employed in other games, especially sequels. Just imagine if other titles employed this technique; we could replay the magical ending of *Ghostbusters* before diving into *Ghostbusters 2*! – PC



Dragon Warrior

Genre: RPG
Release Date: Aug. 1989
Developer: Chunsoft
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★



Set out as a descendant of Erdrick, the hero of times past, to defeat the evil Dragon Lord in one of the earliest examples of a console RPG. This adventure is a solo endeavor, which means no parties to coordinate, healers, tanks, nor black mages. The excellent score, particularly the overworld theme, really highlights this isolation, creating a definite feeling of a warrior with the weight of the world on his back. Players move from town to dungeon to town in search of items that will form the Rainbow Drop which will allow entry to the Dragon Lord's castle. Before that, however, players must rescue the princess from a Dragon hiding in a swamp cave. Mechanically, the battles are quite simple. They are always a single enemy and randomly occur on the map or in dungeons. The player might not have friends, but it seems the enemies are equally antisocial. Battles are turn-based as players can attack, use magic, defend, and flee via menu. Much of the game is simply making sure one is at the required level and has the needed spells in order to defeat the progressively stronger enemies. There are damage-dealing curses, illumination spells, the ever important healing magic, and more. Some enemies are weak to certain spells, and others have attacks that are best not absorbed without the proper enchantment on oneself. Due to the one-on-one nature, this makes some battles feel more like a puzzle to be solved than a test of might. This is actually a decent attribute and helps break up the otherwise monotonous fights. Besides experience points, players will gain gold from battles that can be used to buy better weapons and armor in towns, as well as items than can stored for use later. Navigating the menus is cumbersome, and needing to pull them up to even open a door or climb some stairs is one of the more grating quirks of the game. The enemy design is exceptional and matches the quality of the music, which ensures the grind never gets too boring. This title's certainly worth a look for its importance to the genre.

Reflections: I actually love this game but I can fully admit that it's nostalgia taking hold. I'm fairly certain I got this from my parents for Christmas because they were just as interested. My mom's save game is still on my cartridge today. – IF

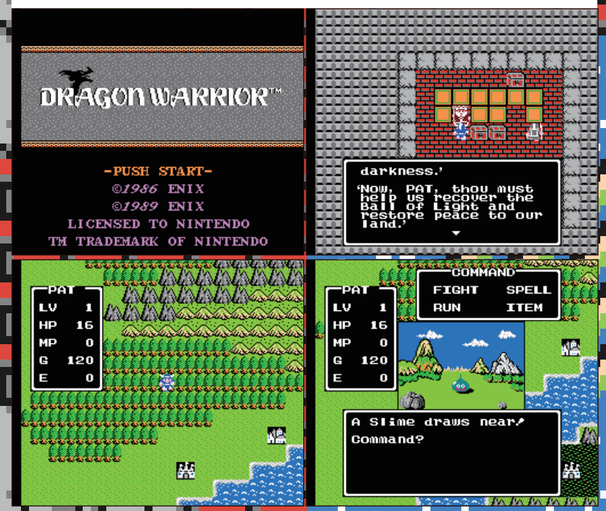
Like 95 percent of the other North American kids, I got Dragon Warrior for free by subscribing to *Nintendo Power* magazine. It turns out that Nintendo was acting as a crack dealer, giving us our first free RPG hit before trying to unleash subsequent RPG titles on U.S. consumers. I thought my first hit felt pretty good, but it wasn't good enough to get me to free-base on the next releases. – PC

Dragon Warrior II

Genre: RPG
Release Date: Sept. 1990
Developer: Chunsoft
Publisher: Enix
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

This sequel to the turn-based RPG takes place 100 years after the setting of the original *Dragon Warrior* by continuing the story of the descendants of Erdrick who have to defeat the evil wizard Hargon. The sequel improves on the gameplay elements of the original in almost every conceivable way. Instead of a single playable character, you control a party of three, each with a unique class/abilities – such as warrior, mage, and the versatile hero. You control this party of characters through towns and castles, while drawing potential random enemy encounters in dungeons and an overworld map. These encounters will bring up a first-person perspective from which you'll select menu commands such as FIGHT, RUN, PARRY, or ITEM to beat a team of baddies – which are based on designs by *Dragon Ball* creator Akira Toriyama. You'll also be able to choose from a wider range of items and spells, fight multiple enemies per battle, and sail a ship to traverse the much larger world map. The story also takes a step forward by deviating from the very basic "save the princess and kill the bad guy" story from the first entry of the series. To this end, there are also many side plots to occupy you, such as exploring and solving the mysteries of the destroyed Moonbrooke Castle. Unfortunately, the gameplay elements can be tedious, especially the copious amounts of "grinding" needed to level up your characters, and visually the game could be better. It's an important stepping stone in the history of console RPGs, but there are other RPGs on the NES with more variety and dynamic gameplay to choose from.

Reflections: As an amateur gaming historian and lover of RPGs, I very much appreciate how much *DW2* brought to the table when it was first released in Japan in early 1987, especially when you consider that the first *Dragon Warrior* (known as *Dragon Quest* in Japan) was released less than a year earlier. It even originates a great Easter egg trope by including the land of Alefgard (from the first game) in a small portion of the new and larger world, much like how the original land of Hyrule from *The Legend of Zelda* is depicted as a small area in *Zelda II*. However, by the time *DW2* was released in late 1990, games like *Final Fantasy* had already come out in North America and had built on the basic formula *Dragon Warrior* had introduced. Certain gameplay elements that I consider original sin for early RPGs are present here (like "missing" targeted enemies that your party has already killed instead of re-targeting). Plus, the awesome faux-Elizabethan English translation from *DW1* was dropped for this game. So unless you feel an intense need to play EVERY *Dragon Warrior* game, feel free to pass this one by, unless it's one of the updated re-releases. – JD

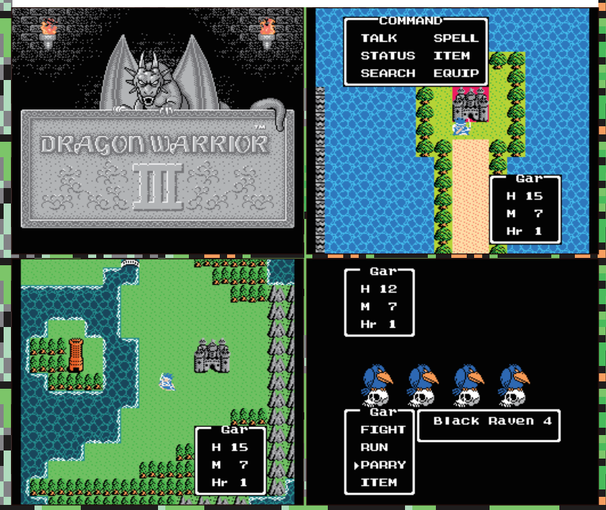


Dragon Warrior III

Genre: RPG
Release Date: Mar. 1992
Developer: Chunsoft
Publisher: Enix
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★⯪

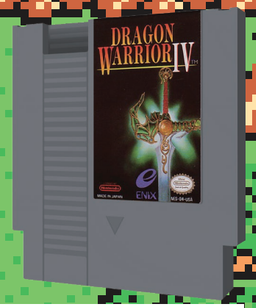
The final entry in the "Erdrick Trilogy," this turn-based RPG takes place generations before the original *Dragon Warrior*. You play as the son of Ortega, a great hero killed by the archfiend, Baramos. The main quest involves creating a party to search for Baramos and save the world from his evil. The gameplay is similar to the first two entries in which you control a group of characters through towns and castles to interact with townspeople and gather information and items. In addition, you'll run across enemies via random encounters in dungeons and on the overworld map. These will thrust you into a first-person perspective where you'll need to best your foes by selecting menu commands such as FIGHT, RUN, PARRY, or ITEM. Magic spells can be used to fight, heal, or run – but MP (magic points) and HP (hit points) need to be conserved with a watchful eye or your party will be destroyed. You have the ability to customize your party members – choosing from seven distinct classes, from the classic spell-casting wizard to the nearly useless goof-off. Of course, there are also many new spells and items to choose from to accommodate the wealth of playable classes. The core gameplay elements are very similar to the previous Dragon Warrior games, though there are significant improvements. Examples include the day/night system, where the time of day will change as you travel, changing who you can interact with in towns and even the types of enemies you'll encounter in the overworld. Though random enemy encounters are again the norm, the need to grind for experience points isn't as heavy-handed as in previous games. In addition, after defeating Baramos, your party will be transported to the world of Alefgard, from the first *Dragon Warrior*, where you'll set forth on a second quest that will become the lore of that game. By mixing the options available through a customizable party, open world, and abundant side quests, there is plenty here to satisfy any fan of the RPG genre.

Reflections: *Dragon Quest* was always popular in Japan, but it was this game that first caused a nationwide sensation. Reportedly, many Japanese children skipped school and businessmen called in sick from work just to get their copies of this highly anticipated game and play it at home. The mania was so huge that Enix voluntarily decided to release future *Dragon Quest* games during the weekend in order to avoid the bad press. In North America, the reaction was a little more reserved. *Dragon Warrior III* took over three years to make its way across the Pacific, and was certainly overshadowed by the recent release of the 16-bit Super Nintendo system. All this to say that *Dragon Warrior III* was one of the most influential and beloved RPGs in its homeland, but even today is virtually unknown outside of it. If you are a fan of Japanese-style role playing games, you owe it to yourself to play this classic title. – JD



Dragon Warrior IV

Genre: RPG
Release Date: Oct. 1992
Developer: Chunsoft
Publisher: Enix
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★★



This turn-based RPG follows a group of adventurers as they set out to defeat the ruler of evil before he destroys the world. The gameplay is similar to past in the series, in which you control a group of characters through towns and castles to interact with townspeople and gather information and items. In addition, you'll run across enemies via random encounters in dungeons and on the overworld map. These will thrust you into a first-person perspective where you'll need to best your foes by selecting menu commands such as ATTACK, SPELL, PARRY, or ITEM. Your party will perish if they all run out of HP (hit points). Where the game takes a twist, however, is in the structure of the story; it takes place over five distinct chapters with the main protagonist only making his appearance in the final chapter. The four proceeding portions of the game set up the cast of characters first. With several hours of gameplay devoted to each chapter, there's a real opportunity to invest in each character: Ragnar the faithful soldier, Alena the tomboy princess, Taloon the clever merchant, and Mara and Nara, the magical twins. By the time the "main story" begins in chapter five, your hero meets these characters in reverse order and gains the knowledge each has learned in the time since you, as the player, last met them. It's a homecoming of sorts and adds to the epic scope of the narrative. Beyond that enhancement, the gameplay makes small evolutions in other ways. For example, though there are still random enemy encounters on the map screen, a "wagon concept" is introduced here which allows you to use all eight members of your party at once (four participating in battle while the rest are kept in reserve). Furthermore, there is a TACTICS system where you can give your party guidelines on how they should fight, rather than control each person individually. This gives characters their own personality not only via storyline, but also with their fighting style. By greatly expanding the game's storytelling, and not fixing what wasn't broken, this title reaches the pinnacle of RPGs on the NES.

Reflections: By the time I first played this game, I was an RPG veteran and had questions about some of the already standard tropes of the RPG genre, such as: What does that guy behind the item shop counter do all day? Well, if the beginning of Taloon's chapter is any indication, the answer is: take a packed lunch from your wife and trudge to the shop to start the day. Then literally sitting behind a counter... waiting for people to walk in... buying and selling... working for the man. It's a brilliant touch that pokes fun at an aspect of RPGs that had already become standard by the end of the '80s. The experience not only encourages players to invest in the story of Taloon (who has become a series fan favorite), but also empathize with other nonplayer characters. Thinking about it still brings a smile to my face. – JD

Dragon's Lair

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Dec. 1990
Developer: MotiveTime
Publisher: CSG Imagesoft
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
●

This absolute trainwreck of a game based on the classic cartoon Laserdisc arcade game manages to capture none of its essence. As Dirk the Daring, the player has to enter a castle and rescue the princess Daphne. The player is immediately greeted with abysmal controls that have Dirk walk, turn, and jump as if he's both stuck in mud and experiencing zero gravity at the same time. Dirk attacks by throwing a knife with the power and accuracy of a paper airplane. Developer MovieTime copied the "instant-death" theme that made the arcade game famous, but here it just doesn't work. This is due to not only the controls being bad, but also because the graphics are muddled so much that the player cannot even decipher what can harm them and what cannot. Also it's confusing to know what is simply drawn into the background and what is dangerous. If Dirk could at least move with some speed to avoid the many traps and enemies, the game would have the chance to be almost tolerable. As it stands, most won't have the patience or "skill" required to even make it past the game's first screen, where Dirk must defeat a dragon to enter the castle itself by throwing dozens of knives at it. This is a blessing in disguise. It's as enjoyable as a medieval plague.

Reflections: The pain this game instills in players is just about palpable. I'm sure Imagesoft thought they would be clever to try and emulate the frustration of the arcade game, but unlike the NES version, in the arcade version you could at least learn from your mistakes somewhat. Hell, the limited, almost nonexistent interactivity of the arcade version controls better than the NES version. At the very least, the arcade game's art and animation was beautiful to behold. The NES version looks like something I could draw in *Mario Paint* with a dirt filter enabled. – PC

I beat the first screen (SCREEN!) once during the charity NES Marathon because bonus money was being offered by the donor if it could be done. it took about half an hour and was about as easy as navigating an alien spacecraft. – IF

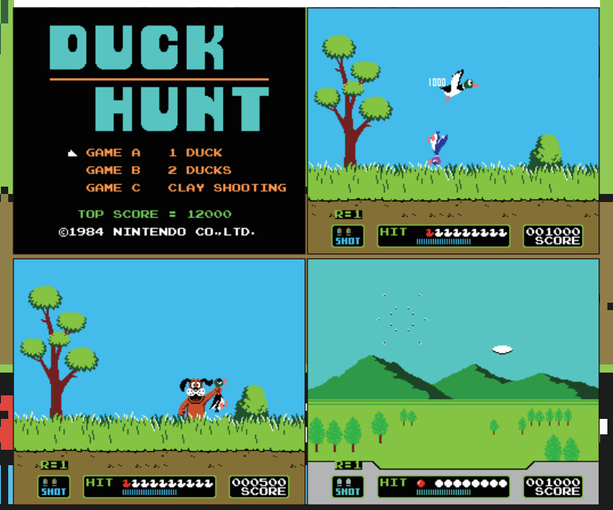
Duck Hunt

Genre: Shooting Gallery
Release Date: Oct. 1985
Developer: Nintendo R&D1
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1
Special Features: Zapper (required)
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★★

This original NES pack-in game was designed to act as an introduction to the Zapper light gun accessory. In first-person perspective, the player shoots ducks (one for game mode A and two at a time in game mode B) that randomly fly in the air on a single screen. There are 10 hunting chances per round. The player has three shots per attempt in a limited amount of time to whack the ducks before they fly away and your hunting dog has a hearty laugh at your expense. The player has a minimum number of ducks that have to be killed in order to move on to the next, more difficult round, where the speed of the flying ducks increases. Eventually, this combined with the increased minimum number of ducks required to be shot creates quite a challenge. There is also a game mode C thrown in for good measure where you can shoot clay pigeons. On the surface a simple tech demo, this title is so much more, featuring memorable sights, sounds, and simple shooting fun. Its charming style and fun tone helped to successfully lay the groundwork for the 750+ NES games to follow.

Reflections: For many people, *Duck Hunt* was one of the first, if not the first game that they experienced on the NES. The colorful and cartoony graphics were a breath of fresh air that made the game a somewhat violent but small joy. A second player can control the duck with a controller in game mode A. It's mostly useless, but a cool feature. The infamous Duck Hunt dog has been made into one of the biggest villains in video game history, all for simply laughing at you when you miss a duck. Why is that such a big deal? It's not like you'll feel like less of a man, unable to fulfill the traditional male role of hunting and providing for your family. It's not like you'll return back home empty-handed and have to face the quiet disappointment in your wife's face knowing that she should have married Carl instead (after all, he was always more of a man). It's not like you'll be sitting in front of lawyers and a judge two years later as your soon to be ex-wife takes everything that you worked so hard to achieve. And it's not like you'll be tying the curtain cord around your neck, and steadying yourself before stepping off a stool and journeying into dark oblivion. Ha, that dog's a hoot! – PC

When I received my NES for Christmas, I didn't know what to make of *Super Mario Bros.* I was used to early PC gaming and platformers weren't common. So I spent a large portion of my first week with the NES playing *Duck Hunt*. It was simple, fun, and immediately understandable (I loved the clay pigeon mode). This little title and my first, fond experiences with the system are inseparable. – IF

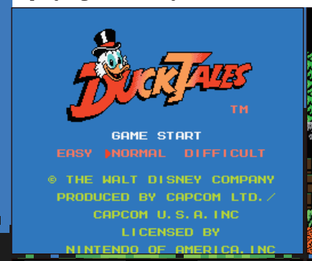


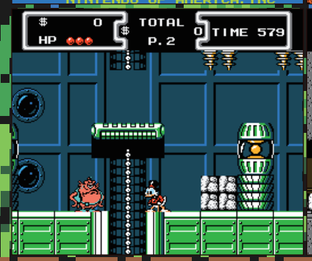
DuckTales

Genre: Platformer
Release Date: Sept. 1989
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★★

Based on the animated show, players control Scrooge McDuck through five exploration-focused, side-scrolling levels in graphically detailed locales such as the Amazon rain forest, the snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas, and even a moon space station. After selecting a stage via menu, players will navigate the sometimes multiple pathways in search of diamonds and the stage boss room where the main treasure is located. Levels are full of secrets, like mirrors that can teleport Scrooge inside the Transylvanian castle, or false snow banks in the Himalayas that hide additional life points. Enemies are well designed and almost all are stage specific. The Amazon has gorillas and killer bees, the moon has blob-like aliens and robot ducks, the Himalayas has hockey players and snow bunnies, and so on. The attention to detail here is pretty incredible all around, but what makes this game stand out is the unique control scheme. Scrooge walks and jumps normally, but can also use his cane as a pogo stick. Just jumping on an enemy will incur damage (in Normal mode he can take three hits). To dispatch enemies, Scrooge must bounce off them with his cane by pressing DOWN + B in mid jump, which will strike the enemy and launch Scrooge higher. If DOWN + B are held, Scrooge can pogo continually. The pogo jump allows Scrooge to reach higher areas, traverse over dangerous spikes, clear huge gaps by nailing a flying enemy midway, and more. The cane can also be used as a golf club when pressed up against certain objects. It can knock boulders into enemies, slide pedestals around so secret areas can be reached, and uncover hidden diamonds from tree stumps and mine carts. Control is tight and hit detection is spot on, which helps this unique weapon make the game feel incredibly fresh and different. Besides the main goal of finding the treasures, there is a secondary game of collecting as much money as possible by accessing Launchpad in certain areas in each stage to return back to the vault where Scrooge can deposit his findings (the stage can be restarted with the diamonds replenished). There are three endings based on this tally: a normal ending, a rich ending, and a very difficult bad ending achieved by not collecting any money at all. All of these aforementioned features plus a classic soundtrack, as well as appearances from the show's characters, make this one of the best and most creative platformers on the NES.

Reflections: *DuckTales* is my favorite video game of all time. The enemies, level layouts, abundant secrets, and soundtrack have stayed with me since the first time I played the game. In high school, I spent a little time multiple days a week beating the game and attempting to get a faster completion time with each go. My best was 13:07 with no glitching. Even my parents loved it – I would faintly hear them playing it from my bedroom after saying goodnight to them. – IF



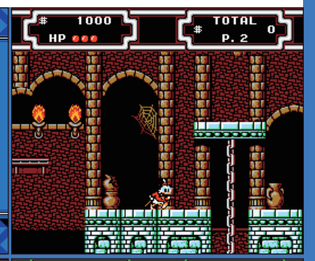


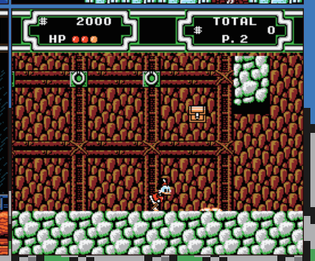
DuckTales 2

Genre: Platformer
Release Date: June 1993
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★★½

Scrooge McDuck once again sets out on a globetrotting adventure to recover five very valuable, one-of-a-kind treasures. Players have the ability to choose the order in which they tackle the levels. Many levels this time around will focus on areas of legend or myth such as a ship in the Bermuda Triangle, the sunken city of Mu, and ghost-filled castles of Scotland. Level designs are lovely and are perfectly suited to our hero's use of his cane which provides him with a unique and fun control scheme. Scrooge can only attack foes by performing a pogo jump off of their heads using his cane. To do so, players must jump and hold B (a slight simplification from the original), which will cause Scrooge to bounce off the enemy and launch himself higher in the air. This is useful not only for dispatching enemies but also for reaching tough spots and secret areas. Scrooge can also knock around certain blocks using his cane as a golf club. Two new main abilities have been added for this sequel, so now Scrooge can latch onto certain blocks and drag them around as well as use the hook of his cane to hang from various rings and latches, creating some very tense jumping portions. Gyro Duck can now be found in various levels, and reaching him will obtain you a power-up that can be used in a different level to obtain hidden treasures. The iron adapter will allow Scrooge to pogo and break iron blocks, the hammer adapter will allow him to break iron blocks with a golf swing, and lastly the power adapter will give Scrooge the ability to pull double stacked pillars that are normally immobile. These additions seem nice, but they really act as fetch quests to lengthen the game. The process could have been streamlined by selling these items in the post-level shop screen, which sells extra lives and curative items. The enemies are thematic to the levels, with ghost knights in Scotland and pirates on the ship in the Bermuda Triangle, lending uniqueness to the environments. Level detail is nice with very little reused assets, and the game has a rather nice if not particularly memorable soundtrack. All in all, it's another gem platformer released late into the system's life, but the potential for some drawn-out backtracking to see everything diminishes it just a bit.

Reflections: *DuckTales 2* is a damn good sequel, but it doesn't top the original, for me anyway. While I love most of the levels, the quests for hidden treasures and Gyro's add-ons are fun maybe once. However, these elements drag out an enjoyable experience a tad longer than needed. It's understandable to want to add things to a sequel, but in all honesty it wasn't needed this time around. It's still something I'll play more often than most of the system's library, as it's a perfectly fine game on its own. – IF





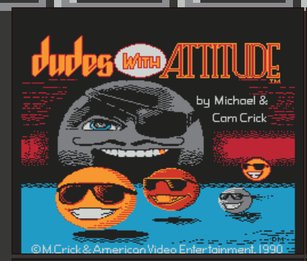
Dudes with Attitude

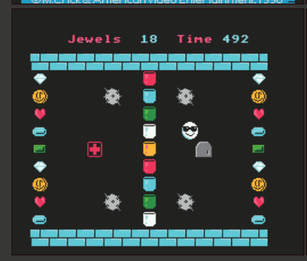
Genre: Puzzle
Release Date: 1990
Developer: Michael and Cam Crick
Publisher: American Video Entertainment
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

The player takes control of a circular smiley face who bounces horizontally on the single-screen puzzle field in order to collect all the treasure on each level. The smiley face constantly moves in a single direction until it hits or bounces off an object to change direction. To collect the treasure, it must usually be "unlocked" by knocking into multi-colored obstacles/objects in its way to make them disappear. Only obstacles/treasure can be collected/eliminated if the player's face is the same color as the object it is running into, so the player must be sure first to run into colored "attitude converters" so that its color matches correctly. If not, the obstacle will not be able to be eliminated until the player matches that same color. The patterns of different colored-objects behind each other create the crux of the gameplay experience, as players will have to remove treasure before going back and forth to different attitude converters to continue and clear the board. The concept is unique for a puzzle game but a little cumbersome in practice, as is the gameplay, which will take some getting used to. There are unlimited lives though, which makes experimenting in the levels less of a risk. The graphics are very simple and there's not much in the way of music/sound, but the fact that the game's concept is so different is what the main draw is here.

Reflections: I have to give AVE credit for trying something new here and not just putting out some half-assed card game, poor sports game, or semi-broken platformer instead.

This is the sort of game that I have to relearn how to play every time it's played – it's that quirky and strange a gameplay concept. I'm not entirely sure how "attitude" fits into the game, but in the late '80s and early '90s that's what you saw on television and magazines – attitude. You also saw bright neon-colored clothes and Cavaricci pants, but the less said about those the better. – PC



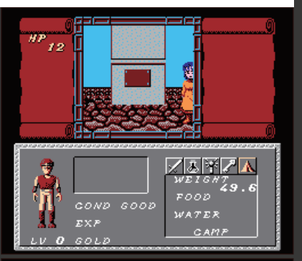


Dungeon Magic: Sword of the Elements

Genre: RPG
Release Date: July 1990
Developer: Natsume
Publisher: Taito
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

To defeat the evil Darces, players must recover Magi's five elemental swords, plus his greatest blade, Tores. You travel in a first-person perspective, pointing your view in one of your compass's cardinal directions. A scroll to the left shows your hit points, and one to the right reveals an enemy's. Below, you will find an image of your player character equipped with your current weapon and armor. You will see your level, condition (such as poisoned or paralyzed), your experience points, gold, and special items. An awkward menu system allows you to equip arms/fight, select/use items, concoct/cast spells, pick up items, open doors, and camp to replenish health. When you fight, you strike with the A button and try to "parry" hits by backing away. This is tricky to master, especially in the beginning when hit points are low. The spellcasting option initially depends on which elemental wizard (water, earth, fire, wind, or fairies) you choose to apprentice with at the start. Your master gives you symbols that you combine for different effects, such as attack spells, shield spells, antidote spells, etc. As you collect elemental swords, you will learn symbols from other wizards. Your master also decides when you level up. This game provides a large world with many caves and dungeons to explore. However, the sameness of textures in each environment makes it incredibly easy to get lost without a map spell. Even seeking an item/weapon shop or an inn to save your progress in a friendly town can be a maze-like experience. The game is also often music free, which contributes to its vague bleakness. It does offer some interesting concepts, and is worth a try for a dedicated player.

Reflections: When a game manual gives you a suggestion of what starting class is best, do you go along with it? Or do you purposely choose anything but? The latter is what I tend to do. Maybe I'm just being a contrarian. Maybe I like making life harder on myself. Or maybe I'm on to something. This game's manual suggests you begin by apprenticing with the water wizard, which grants you the ability to cast shield spells. Something told me I wouldn't be happy going this route, but I suppressed my rebellious tendencies and signed up. Big mistake. Sure, the shields absorbed some of the damage from those marauding pink snakes that carpet the world map, but I still died. A lot. What was worse is that I kept getting horribly lost (the sameness of the environment did not help). Finally, I started over and apprenticed with the fairies wizard, which gave me a marvelous map spell that also reveals where enemies and treasure chests are. Sure, I still died a bunch, but now I had direction, which improved my experience immensely. I guess sometimes it's better to do what you know is right, rather than what you're told. – AP



Dusty Diamond's All-Star Softball

Genre: Sports
Release Date: July 1990
Developer: TOSE
Publisher: Brøderbund Software
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★

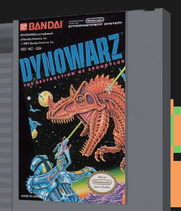
Hit the diamond in this zany softball game. The first game choice consists of either a single game or tournament mode, where players have to defeat five other teams in a row before facing the Amazons in the championship. A slow or fast pitch mode may also be selected, with the primary differences being the speed of pitches as well as 10 men in the field for slow pitch and only nine for fast pitch. Players can play on one of six fields at different locations, each with their own layout, obstacles, hazards, and ground rules (for example: shattering a window on the schoolyard results in an out). The in-field action is solid: batting and pitching are both very smooth and fielding is a breeze. Being softball, there is no ability to steal bases, but all other standard baseball rules are present. Sixty different players are available to fill up your team, each with their own unique offensive/defensive abilities, as well as special powers. These include talents such as dodging tags on the basepath, becoming a better player at night, the ability to move through obstacles such as water, and even the ability to fly around in the air to catch a ball. Witnessing and utilizing the players' different abilities is really what makes the game shine, and knowing where to use each player according to their abilities and powers adds a nice strategic element. The graphics and music are nothing special, but they are adequate, and it's nice that all 60 different players are identifiable when pitching, batting, and even in the field. While not a totally authentic NES baseball experience, its quirkiness and originality certainly make it memorable.

Reflections: There were nearly 20 baseball games released on the NES, with most being average or forgettable. Thankfully a game like *Dusty Diamond's All-Star Softball* rises up through the mediocrity and at least attempts to do something a bit different. I can remember the first time I played the game at a friend's house and saw an outfielder flapping its wings in the air while flying around – I almost lost it.

There is not a good way to select players for your team unless you're equipped with either the manual or an online guide to let you know what each player's strengths and abilities are. The description of the players is pretty well-written and a little humorous. Some of the funnier named ones include Zelda, the only selectable female player (who happens to be a witch), Arnie Schwarz, and Babe Blutarski, who may be a combination of Babe Ruth and John Blutarsky from the film *National Lampoon's Animal House*. – PC

Dynowarz: Destruction of Spondylus

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Apr. 1990
Developer: Advance Communication
Publisher: Bandai
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★



Players take control of the Cyborasaurus, a robot dinosaur, and set out to destroy lots of enemy Robosaurs to save the planets of the Spondylus System. The Cyborasaurus begins with a punch but has four available projectile weapons with different attributes. Attacks can be upgraded to two or three levels by collecting specific power-up icons: Fire Ball, Launch Fist, Beam, and Bomb. These weapons are used to take out enemies such as robotic Tyrannosaurus rex and Stegosaurus. Other pick-ups include energy capsules, shield capsules, and an item to destroy all the enemies on screen. In the first and every other level of the game, the player takes control of the human professor who drives the Cyborasaurus. These shorter levels consist of platforming over pits while avoiding wall canons and robotic hounds. Players must destroy a central computer at the end of these stages before returning to the Cyborasaurus for the next level. The change in gameplay modes breaks up the action, although the monotony of both types will become apparent after only a handful of levels. The limited number of enemies and attack patterns also does not help distinguish levels from one another. Still, it is a nice game with solid graphics and a very good concept behind it.

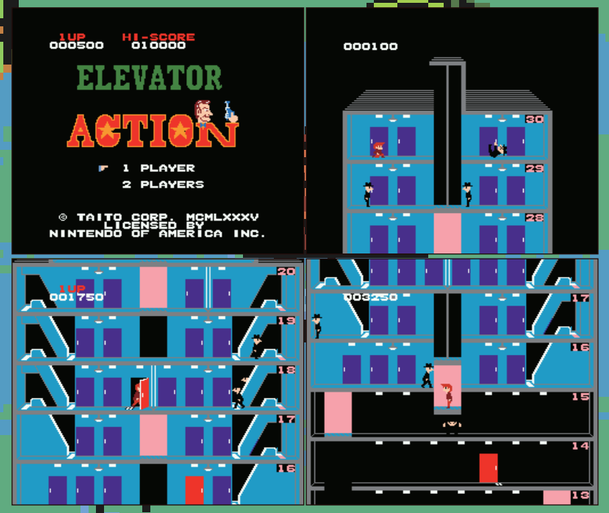
Reflections: Dinosaur robots?! This could be one of the coolest ideas for an NES game. What eight year old wouldn't want to control a robot T-Rex shooting lasers at other robot dinos?! It's just a shame that all the levels play exactly the same with little differences between them. As an aside, "Spondylus" sounds like a delicious Greek delicacy. – PC

Elevator Action

Genre: Action
Release Date: Aug. 1987
Developer: Taito,
Ported by: Micronics
Publisher: Taito
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⋆

The player is Agent 17, tasked to retrieve documents in high rise buildings. After shimmying down to the roof via a rope, players start at the top floor and must work their way down via elevators and escalators while avoiding or dispatching enemy agents via a pistol or an awkward jump kick. They fire back, and their shots will have to be avoided by ducking or jumping. Documents can be collected by entering certain doors on the floors. Once all documents in the building are collected, the player may exit the building at the bottom. They'll jump into a sports car to repeat the process on the next stage, which quickly gets repetitive. The pace of the action may be an issue to some, as traveling up and down escalators/elevators and waiting for elevators seem to take up a chunk of time while playing (let alone if you have to wait for and travel back up an elevator due to a dead end). It's a challenging but solid game with decent controls whose fun factor largely depends upon fondness of the arcade game.

Reflections: I know it's a heralded arcade game, but I don't find *Elevator Action* to be that interesting. Maybe it's because the gameplay is more complicated than the other classic arcade games and each level takes a lot longer to get through? Maybe it's the uninteresting graphics and gameplay? I'm not sure why. I love spy movies, spy adventures, James Bond, the whole lot. Maybe I'd be more interested if we were more privy to what Agent 17 was stealing? Are we talking Cold War secrets, or boring industrial espionage? If it's the latter and we're stealing patent papers for new toaster oven technology, I'm out. Or perhaps I'm just turned off by the coif our hero sports. – PC



Eliminator Boat Duel

Genre: Racing
Release Date: Nov. 1991
Developer: Sculptured Software,
Radioactive Software
Publisher: Electro Brain
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

This one-on-one speedboat racing game features several colorful computer opponents, with the ability to start on a later, harder one. The 25 races take place in either the bayou, wharf, or ocean settings. Races usually consist of three different gameplay types, broken up into legs. All races start with a side-scrolling drag race, with the player being able to accelerate when the flag is waved by the bikini-clad woman (false starts result in loss of money). The game then progresses back and forth between the overhead and third-person racing modes. The overhead racing consists of maneuvering on the track while avoiding hitting the obstacles and buildings that line the sides. Hitting them can result in damage to the ship's hull, the condition of which is displayed on screen. There are also hazards on the course to watch out for, for example sharks and crabs that will slow you down. Pick-ups on the overhead courses include cash and nitros for a limited speed boost (up to nine can be collected). There are also ramps and radioactive barrels that, if hit, will give the player a slight speed boost and cause a jump. Landing on opponents will slow them down and damage them. The third-person racing modes convey a great deal of speed, as players must maneuver their boats between two sides of flags in the water (hitting them will slow you down). Nitros can be picked up here, but logs and crocodiles should be avoided to prevent damage and slowing down. If either boat sustains too much damage in the race, they will forfeit. At the end of each race, players can use cash won to repair damage and upgrade their boat for better top speed, acceleration, hull strength, and steering. Players are only allowed two losses before the game ends, so it can be a stiff challenge, especially in later stages. It's a nice, tight, racing package with solid graphics, fine controls, and plenty of personality. Even if it's not an entirely deep experience, there's just enough variety and polish here to keep speeding along in the water.

Reflections: This title was one of the best surprises to come out of the original NES Charity Marathon, where Ian Ferguson and I played every NES game over 31 hours. This was one that we really did not want to put down due to how much fun it was, even if we only had a couple of minutes to play each NES game. This title probably also represents the most gratuitous display of female semi-nudity in the NES library, with two-piece bikini women almost everywhere you look. Every cart produced for this game had a misprint on the top of the label - *Elimonator Boat Duel*. I'm not sure how mistakes like that manage to sneak through. "Elimonator" sounds like either a countertop surface cleaner or a fruit drink mixer you'd see advertised on infomercials. – PC

Excitebike

Genre: Racing
Release Date: Oct. 1985
Developer: Nintendo R&D1
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1
Special Features: Edit Mode
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★★

In this horizontally scrolling motocross game, players race on one of five courses of increasing difficulty. Racers will face ramps, jumps, and obstacles which must be navigated in order to come in at third place or better based upon the maximum time allotted for each race. The tracks consist of five lanes than can be moved up/down in. Two different game modes are available, one where the player races alone and a more difficult (and more fun) mode where you race with CPU opponents who you have to try to avoid or can crash into. If players crash, they will be thrown from the bike, but can slam the controller buttons to run back to the bike and try again. The gameplay is fast, challenging, and relentless. It requires quick reactions to bob and weave on the course to avoid obstacles and racers. Precision is necessary when making jumps to make sure the bike is at the proper angle when launching off of ramps and at the best angle to land correctly and efficiently. There is also a bit of strategy involved in calculating how much the bike should be revved to go faster (using B), versus throttling down to prevent the engine from overheating and losing speed/time. A track creation mode exists where the player can race through a track of their own design (although it cannot be saved). One of the earliest NES games, this is an example of a simple concept lifted to great heights via pushing the NES to its early limits with solid graphics, nice sound design, and a touch of polish.

Reflections: It's hard to find retro gamers who have not heard of *Excitebike*, let alone haven't played it at least once. This launch title really helped show off the potentially huge gap between what the NES had to offer versus the prior console generation. Everything from the goofily fun intro theme to the cutesy graphics of the racers and the audience made this a flag-bearing title which helped buoy the system in its precarious early existence in the United States. The Famicom Disk version of this game had a versus split screen mode which allowed for a simultaneous race between two players. It's too bad they never re-released this game years later with that mode added on. – PC

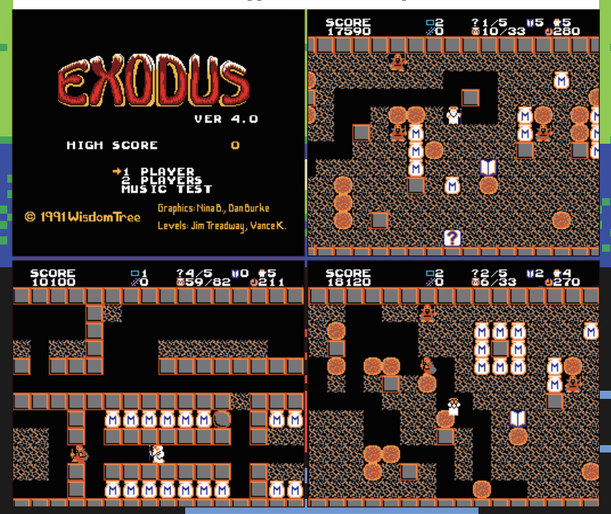
Exodus: Journey to the Promised Land

Genre: Action, Educational
Release Date: 1991
Developer: Wisdom Tree
Publisher: Wisdom Tree
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★⋆

In this Bible-themed game, you guide Moses through 100 timed levels that are large, maze-like rooms laid out on a grid. Each room is filled with objects to collect, obstacles to circumvent/destroy, and enemies to avoid/defeat. Moses moves in eight directions, and is equipped with the Word of God, a W-shaped projectile he fires in one of four directions. He increases this projectile's range and the quantity that can be fired by collecting crown and W icons, which represent the Authority of God and the Word of God, respectively. These power-ups accumulate and last until Moses loses a life. Moses also collects and uses staffs, which act as time bombs that create a three-by-three square explosion. Additional power-ups include brief invulnerability to enemies/explosions, sandals that allow mud/straw squares to be traversed, etc. Moses must also pick up a level-specific quantity of Manna ("M" objects) and five question icons (both noted at the top of the screen) to make each level's exit square appear. What makes this task tricky are the many obstacle squares, which include destructible panels, pushable bricks, impenetrable walls, falling boulders, exploding Golden Calves of Sin, constantly expanding straw/mud patches, etc. Stacks of certain things, like the Obstacles to Faith (brown boulders), can be made to cascade down in an unusual step-like manner, potentially crushing Moses. Enemies, like Sorcerers, Taskmasters, and Magicians, move around the levels and require multiple hits/explosions or falling objects to defeat. Though easy at first, the levels soon become difficult, and require quick thinking and reflexes to solve them. When you clear a level, you take a five-question multiple-choice quiz on the Book of Exodus (10 correct answers earns an extra life). You also get a scene from Moses' life, such as a depiction of one of the 10 plagues. This game is engaging and challenging, and definitely worth a try for puzzle fans.

Reflections: This is ostensibly an educational game about the Book of Exodus, and it succeeds on some level by naming objects after something Biblical, such as the Omer of Manna, the Murmurings of Israel, etc., and by ending each level with a quiz about the life of Moses. However, the game seems to subvert this education a bit by not supplying the correct answers when you answer wrongly. Next, if you become stuck in a level, you can press START + SELECT to restart, which would be fine except that that makes Moses *blow himself up* and lose a life. Lastly, there's the scene at the burning bush. I'm not an expert theologian, and I couldn't describe what God does look like, but I'm pretty sure it's not Edward Scissorhands with a pair of Mickey Mouse gloves. Just a guess. – AP

In the first NES Marathon, Ian and I named the Manna icons "Moses Milk" due to their similar appearance to, well, pitchers of milk. – PC



F-117A Stealth Fighter

Genre: Shooter, Simulation
Release Date: Dec. 1992
Developer: MicroProse Software
Publisher: MicroProse Software
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★

This simulation has players taking control of a powerful fighter jet equipped with stealth technology. After selecting the difficulty level, players begin on their campaigns of different missions in various hostile regions. After taking off from a carrier at sea, the objective of each level is to fly to and destroy a primary ground target, possible secondary ground targets, and then return to the aircraft carrier, all the while avoiding enemy aircraft and ground units deploying ground-to-air missiles. Armed with a vulcan cannon and ground/air missiles, players will use the map on the HUD (heads up display) to fly in the direction of the target (an arrow on top of the screen also will point in the direction). The HUD also displays other helpful information, such as the speed, altitude, remaining ammo/missiles, countermeasures, and even a "stealthometer" which is the level of visibility the plane has to radar. The stealth meter isn't random, but rather flying in a specific way will help ensure the craft keeps off enemy radar. Controls are fine and what you'd expect from a simulation, with the shortcomings of the lack of buttons on the NES controller made up for by using SELECT + button combinations to change speed, change weapon type, and even engage an autopilot on the fly. Combat feels nice, if slightly rudimentary in execution, with a strange quick pause when an enemy craft explodes. Level of enjoyment of this title will depend upon the familiarity/enjoyment of the genre, but with multiple difficulties, unlockable missions, upgradeable weapons, good presentation, and a two-player co-op mode, you're not going to be able to do much better on the NES in terms of a combat simulator.

Reflections: You can't really expect much more on the NES than what MicroProse managed to squeeze into this cartridge. My first experience with this title was through a Creative Labs CD-ROM set my father bought for our IBM 486 PC. It consisted of the Sound Blaster 16 card (upgrade from the PC speaker) and a blistering fast 2X CD-ROM. A handful of CDs were included in the box, amongst them *Iron Helix*, *Return to Zork*, and MicroProse's *Land, Sea, Air, and the World* compilation CD consisting of *Silent Service II*, *F-117A*, *Railroad Tycoon*, and *Civilization*. I remember playing *F-117A* a little at first, but once I took a chance on that strange game about building a society, the other three games on the CD collected virtual dust. Kings of the genre, those MicroProse fellas. I hear they get a little wild at company parties. In reality, the F-117A looks somewhat "alien," and a glut of UFO sightings around U.S. air bases in the 1980s could probably be attributed to this craft. As far as I know, it's still in use today, but there's probably even crazier tech out there right now defending 'Murica. – PC

F-15 City War

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: 1990
Developer: Idea-Tek
Publisher: American Video Entertainment
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Uncommon
★⋆

This shooter alternates between third-person 3D perspective levels and overhead vertically scrolling ones in an F-15 fighter jet. In the 3D levels, players pilot a plane and fire unlimited machine guns and missiles at enemy copters, planes, and ground targets such as tanks and robots. Players must keep constantly moving to avoid enemy fire. These levels are fairly straightforward, and while somewhat technically impressive, lack any real substance or even any frills such as power-ups. They also go on for way too long before facing an enemy boss. Overall, the 3D levels aren't exciting but passable. The overhead levels, however, are a slow, plodding slog. The jet moves way too slowly to hit many enemies or avoid some of the fire coming at you, and the lack of any power-ups is a lost opportunity to try and improve the gameplay and make it interesting in any real way. While playable, the syrupy pace and extremely long levels will make you want to quit well before the end. It's a shame that the split focus on two entirely different gameplay perspectives results in neither one being done with enough competence to warrant a recommendation.

Reflections: While being called *City War*, most of the game doesn't take place in a city. I'm guessing that's only fitting since that'd be one insanely large city for the entire game to take place in.

The story in the manual is bizarrely told in large letters that get bigger on every line, culminating with "PROTECT IT OR DIE!" You know your narrative is in danger when your only way to instill a sense of interest is not by writing an engaging story, but by increasing the font size by a magnitude of 12. – PC

F-15 Strike Eagle

Genre: Shooter, Simulation
Release Date: Feb. 1992
Developer: MicroProse Software
Publisher: MicroProse Software
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★⯪

This air combat simulator, played via first-person cockpit view, has the player piloting an F-15 Strike Eagle jet on several missions in the Persian Gulf. After taking off from an aircraft carrier, the objective of each mission is to fly to and destroy a primary ground target and possible secondary targets before returning to and landing on the carrier. Armed with a machine gun and three missile types, players must fend off enemy units such as jets, tanks, and surface-to-air missile units. Players can defend against enemy fire by maneuvering and deploying flare/chaff countermeasures to thwart enemy missiles. Being a simulation, flying the plane isn't simple and requires some practice, but thankfully an on-screen arrow guides a player to their destination. Four levels of difficulty are available to the player, enabling more flying autonomy and weapon control. However, when given total control the player has to awkwardly stop the action and switch to a cumbersome menu to select different missiles or countermeasures before going back to the action. This negative aside, the simulation of air-to-air combat is excellent, and the challenge just fair enough to justify the learning curve. A two-player mode rounds out the experience, either taking turns or offering a very nifty simultaneous mode where the first player flies and the second player controls weapon functions, mirroring reality.

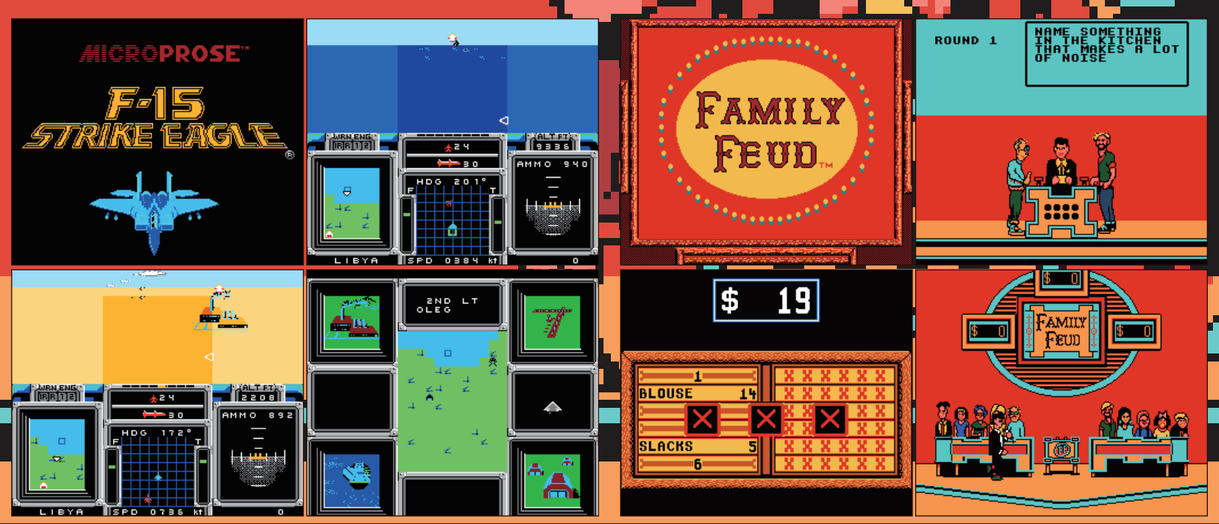
Reflections: *F-15 Strike Eagle* was the first PC game I was exposed to; my father purchased it when he bought his 5150 IBM compatible (I was there). Although the complicated gameplay escaped me as a child (you were required to use the keyboard to use all the plane's functions), when I got older I appreciated the game for what it is – an excellent and mostly accurate air and ground combat simulator. It was heavily awarded in the mid '80s and helped jump-start the MicroProse PC combat simulator empire of the mid-to-late '80s. While the NES version is heavily stripped down from the PC version (no bombs, no manual control of speed, etc.), playing this game still gives me the memories of a child struggling to play with a two button joystick, heavy clicky keyboard, and a xeroxed copy of the keyboard controls plunked down in front of me. – PC

Family Feud

Genre: Game Show, Trivia
Release Date: May 1991
Developer: Beam Software
Publisher: GameTek
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★⯪

An adaptation of the television game show, *Family Feud* has the player command a five-person family team who must guess the top survey answers to random questions asked of 100 people. Players use an alphabet parser menu to enter their answer. Points are earned for correct answers based upon how many people in the survey also gave that same answer. Three wrong answers before getting them all will give the opposing team a chance to steal the round by selecting one of the remaining answers. If they get one, they'll receive all the points for that round. The first family to earn 200 points qualifies for the "Fast Money" bonus round to win a nice cash prize! Here, players are given a set of five different questions to answer, twice in a row. If the team reaches 200 points, they win the bonus! It's a by-the-book adaptation, but the options are very limited and the text-parser interface isn't always the best at judging answers. For example, "golf balls" is an acceptable answer to "What is found on a golf course?" but "balls" is deemed incorrect. It's okay if you're a fan of the show, but others might find it a bit too breezy, especially since the answers are more subjective than definite.

Reflections: I loved the *Family Feud* television show growing up. The most exposure I had to this game was with the very solid SNES version. Unfortunately, the NES version doesn't stack up as well. What I do like about the NES version though is the random, cartoony, and bizarre characters you are given for your family. Some look goofy, some look demented, but all are a hoot! – PC



The Fantastic Adventures of Dizzy

Genre: Adventure, Platformer
Release Date: 1991
Developer: Codemasters
Publisher: Camerica
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

Player take control of Dizzy the egg out to free his friends from a spell and rescue his girlfriend Daisy from the evil wizard Yaks in this free-roaming adventure game. Dizzy can walk and spin jump around from one location to another at will. These include a giant treehouse, a city, pirate ship, cemetery, and more. The objective of the game is to collect and use various objects in order to solve puzzles to unlock further environments/locations. Finding and collecting all of the stars that are scattered throughout the game will unlock the tower where Daisy is being held. Up to three objects can be carried by Dizzy at once, and they can be swapped out for others found throughout the player's journey. Enemies cannot be attacked in any way but must be avoided or else damage is sustained (which can be replenished via fruit that is picked up and eaten). Some nice mini-games such as a mine cart level and a shooting game break up the side-scrolling action and must be completed as well to get all the needed stars. Graphically, this title is very impressive with nicely drawn character sprites/backgrounds as well as a varied color palette. The very smooth controls allow Dizzy to get around fairly easily, which is fortunate since Dizzy will be traversing the same areas over and over again to try and figure out the puzzles. And that's where this title falters under its own weight, as there are no real directions or hints given to the puzzles, and while some are simple, some are very obtuse, which will require a lot of trial/error, head-scratching, and walking back and forth across the world to drop and pick up different items continuously in order to attempt to solve them. It's ambitious and technically impressive, but lacking a more defined gameplay structure.

Reflections: Dizzy is apparently the Super Mario of the United Kingdom, or else that is what Camerica/Codemasters would have you believe. There were several Dizzy games released there (and two more on the *Quattro* multicarts), so maybe there's something to that claim, but if so, that just makes me sad for UK gamers, even though the Yolkfolk are incredibly cute characters. One more thing: do the spin jumps that Dizzy performs scramble his brain? Hey, hey, put that pitchfork down! – PC

Fantasy Zone

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: 1989
Developer: Sega
Ported by: Pixel
Publisher: Tengen
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★⯪

In this spotty port of Sega's cute and psychedelic horizontal arcade shooter, players take control of Opa Opa, the sentient spaceship. Using a standard attack and bombs, players must clear each stage of floating bases before moving on to confront a boss. Unlike most traditional horizontal shooters, the levels do not have an end but wrap around while also allowing the ship to scroll left and right. Another unique aspect is the ability for Opa Opa to be able to walk left and right when on the ground. A small radar map on the bottom of the screen shows the location of remaining bases. Opa Opa's weapons, bombs, and ship speed can be upgraded by collecting gems from enemies and entering shops floating on balloons to purchase them. Unfortunately, the weapon upgrades (laser beam, wide beam, and 5-way shot) only last for a limited amount of time. It's a very solid design for a game with cute little ships and creatures/enemies. There's also very catchy music adding to the charm, but this version of the game loses a lot of that good will with a drab palette and very choppy scrolling. This scrolling is one of the main problems in the game, as it makes avoiding enemies trickier than it should be, and waves of baddies will often appear as soon as one changes direction, which results in a lot of unavoidable deaths. The game is just this side of playable, but that isn't an incredibly positive recommendation.

Reflections: The Tengen ports of Sega properties always seemed like a great way to get some of their better catalog without owning two systems, but most of them only served to make players want the real game even more. I think *Fantasy Zone* is the worst offender here, not because it's unplayable, but because the original is so lovely and this port loses a good chunk of its charm. – IF

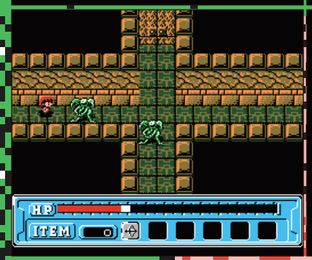
The first stage theme is so unabashedly cute and upbeat that it probably could be used in a Coca-Cola commercial where everybody holds hands and achieves world peace by drinking a sugary soft drink. Likewise, it could also be the eventual theme blared out of UFO loudspeakers as the alien invaders line us all up and prepare us as their supper. – PC

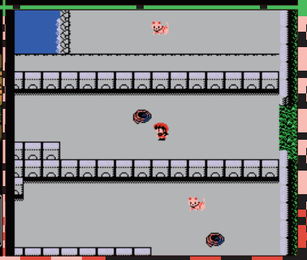
Faria: A World of Mystery and Danger

Genre: Action-RPG
Release Date: June 1991
Developer: Game Arts
Publisher: Nexoft
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★

An evil wizard is terrorizing the land! Are you the hero chosen to defeat him? The story is typical of RPGs, with princesses and monsters, yet atypically, you're female! The King gives you quests, which lead to sub-quests. The game is in overhead view, and you visit towns and dungeons through a world map with random battles. You move with the D-pad and use menus with A and B. Start opens a window showing menu options like ITEM, STATUS, and EQUIP. In towns there are different options like TALK, BUY, or HEAL. On the map characters are small, but when they speak you'll see animated anime-style portraits. Talking to townspeople and exploring is vital to moving onward. You begin without equipment but can buy a blade, a bow (plus arrows), armors, magic, and more in towns. Random battles switch to a single-screen scene and combat is action-based, with A and B operating weapons. The monsters (including slimes, insects, knights, etc.) run around, ram you, or throw projectiles. You can escape, but you'll lose valuables. Unlike you, they can move diagonally, so evasion and aiming is difficult. You're slower, but buying "hyperspeed" accessories helps. The dungeons are often towers or caves. Caves are pitch black labyrinths, requiring a flashlight that only shows some steps ahead, and batteries (when they die, you do). Encounters still occur here like on the world map. The towers are multi-floor mazes where monsters roam freely, with secret treasures and passages. Bosses wait within, and you must learn their attack patterns or use special items to win. This game is cruel, but there is a save feature, and the manual contains a world map, locations, items, and a condensed walkthrough. The music and graphics are serviceable but don't shine, and the battle controls feel stiff. Still, it's a competent old-school challenge.

Reflections: On the NES, there were RPGs, but they weren't as well-known as they would be later. On top of that, *Faria* itself isn't that memorable of a game, especially with superior titles out there. For a 1991 release, it feels chunkier than it should, although that might be explained by its true age; it was first released as *Faria Fuuin no Tsurugi* in Japan in 1989. Did *Faria* deserve better? I'd say so. If it's not a hidden gem, then it's still a pretty stone. Even though it's not the most original RPG on the NES, it still has its moments. On your first quest, the king gives you a drawing of his daughter, the princess, whom you must rescue. It's a caterpillar. No one questions it. No one mentions it. She changes by the time you find her, but no one questions that either. It's just so silly. – KN



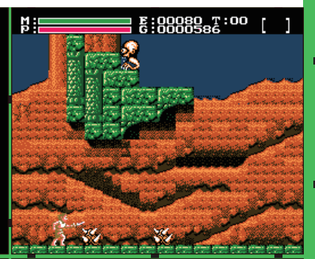


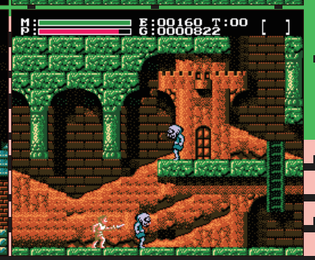
Faxanadu

Genre: Action-RPG
Release Date: Aug. 1989
Developer: Hudson Soft
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⋆

In this side-scrolling action-RPG, it's up to you to defeat the Evil One and save the Elves from the Dwarfs, who were transformed and driven insane by a poison meteorite. You face monsters such as levitating bird men, wandering tentacles, flying phantoms, and skeletal hounds. Fortunately, there are hospitals to heal you, and tool shops located in and around the many towns of the World Tree sell weapons, armor, shields, and magic. You use blades for short-ranged combat, and various spells, from Deluge to Death, to deal damage from afar. Magic is limited by a meter that drains with each use. Defeating monsters yields either life-replenishing bread or money ("Golds"). It also grants experience points, which allow you to obtain various titles from Gurus. Your title determines how many Golds and experience points you have upon restarting, whether after dying or entering a Mantra (password) received from a Guru. From time to time, the Gurus, as well as other townspeople, give useful information and even items to help you proceed. You will also find and/or purchase crucial objects, like Wing Boots to reach high places, a Mattock to break walls, keys named for playing cards (e.g. Jack, Queen, King), red potions to fill your health bar, etc. This game offers many places to explore and diverse re-spawning enemies. Just be sure to copy the Mantra carefully, as some characters, like the "O" and the zero, look nearly alike, and losing progress after fighting hundreds of monsters is frustrating.

Reflections: I think the title system is a nifty way to make gaining experience more interesting: "I'm not just Level Four, I'm a *Fighter*!" or "Thirteen Levels? All in a day's work... for a *Champion*." I do wonder about the relative merits of some of the titles, however. Why does one outrank another? I can understand why Superhero (Level 14) rates higher than Hero (Level 10), but what makes Soldier (Level 11) better than Warrior (Level Eight), or Swordman (Level Nine) better than Veteran (Level Seven)? And who thought Myrmidon (Level 12) was a good idea for a title? When I hit that rank, I was a little confused, being unfamiliar with the word (I envisioned an armored mermaid). So I looked it up, and according to Merriam-Webster, it means "a subordinate who executes orders unquestioningly or unscrupulously." When the Guru gives you a new title, he tells you to "make sure you live up to it." An unscrupulous subordinate? I don't think so. – AP





Felix the Cat

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Oct. 1992
Developer: Hudson Soft
Publisher: Hudson Soft
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★

The player takes control of the iconic Felix the Cat and must rescue his girlfriend Kitty from the evil Professor across nine side-scrolling worlds on land, on sea, underwater, and in the air. Felix attacks enemies via his magic bag, and can upgrade his look and attack capability by collecting 10 Felix head icons and then the heart that drops. For example, on land Felix starts out using a short-range boxing glove, but can upgrade to a magician using a magic burst, a car that attacks with its horn honk, and finally a tank with the longest ranged attack. Different upgrades also can occur on the stage level types but with similar gameplay results. Surface water stages have Felix start in a rowboat with a punch and then ride on a dolphin who spits, while underwater has Felix starting with a snorkel and punch, then riding on a turtle who shoots bubbles and finally shooting torpedoes from a submarine. Flying levels have Felix start with an umbrella but being able to throw frisbees from a hot air ballon and shoot from an airplane. Getting hit by one of the cute cartoon enemies will revert Felix back to his previous form. Controls are spot-on, which makes traversing the linear but usually explorative levels smooth and enjoyable. The worlds all have nicely differing environments and enemies, although the enemies are a bit too simplistic and you'll find that many are reskinned from one world to the next. The music is cheery and well done, and the graphics are colorful and finely detailed. Overall, the game is a very fun and uniquely designed romp with a great main character, although the difficulty is almost too easy in some places.

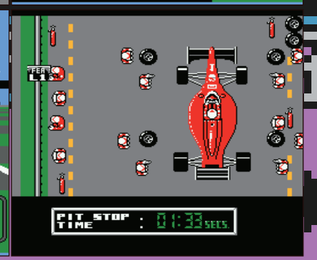
Reflections: Felix the Cat was absolutely huge when he originally appeared in cartoons in the 1920s, and then again in the 1950s when he came back with a resurgence. If you've ever seen those cat wall clocks with the moving tails and eyes that dart back and forth, that's Felix. It's a shame that he's sort of fallen off the cartoon map, but he's the first animated character that was popular, and I dig how he's a little bit more different than other traditional cartoons, especially with his magical bag of tricks. It was a strange licensing choice for Hudson Soft, though, as no new cartoons were being produced when the game was released, and the animated film bombed big time in the U.S. in 1991. Maybe there were a lot of *Felix the Cat* fans at Hudson Soft at the time? – PC

Ferrari Grand Prix Challenge

Genre: Racing
Release Date: June 1992
Developer: System 3 Software
Publisher: Acclaim Entertainment
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⋆

This Formula One simulation has you racing on a season circuit of 16 different race tracks, with different racing teams accumulating points to win the championship. Players input their name and select either automatic or manual shifting for their racer. Gameplay takes place in a third-person perspective. A handy cockpit display shows your track, placement of yourself and the other racers, a rear-view mirror, and a text box "radio" where your pit crew can tell you when to stop in for repairs (when your tires start to wear) or to warn you of upcoming hazards on the track. Pitting for repairs is easy, with the only requirements being to drive into the pit-lane and then press A and B alternately to quickly work the pit crew. The visuals and sounds are solid, the game does a good job of conveying speed, the controls are fine, and the challenge makes it so that you have to actually race with some intelligence and pick your spots of when to pass the other racers, or else you won't get far. It's a solid Formula One simulation that has something to offer for the serious racing fan.

Reflections: F1 Racing isn't exactly big in the United States. I'm surprised that half the racing games on the system aren't rarer than they actually are. As nice as this game is, if I never play it again I shall not miss it. Nothing personal, *Ferrari Grand Prix Challenge*. – PC



Fester's Quest

Genre: Action-Adventure
Run and Gun Shooter
Release Date: Sept. 1989
Developer: Sunsoft
Publisher: Sunsoft
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★

When aliens invade, it's up to Uncle Fester from *The Addams Family* to blast them back to space! It plays like a shooter but has adventure aspects requiring exploration. It's a single open level in an overhead view with three general environment types: streets, sewers, and 3D-perspective mazes. B shoots, Select pauses, and the Start button opens a menu for items to use with the A button. You get two hit points and no lives. Continues are infinite, but you're returned to the start with your items and weapons. The aliens begin as immobile blobs, giant frogs, paralyzing flies, and slimes, and later progress to insectoids. They're bullet sponges and often respawn instantly – waves of them cascading towards you. Some enemies can stun Fester, making movement excruciatingly slow. Defeated enemies leave power-up icons: GUN, WHIP, $, and light bulb or key symbols. The light bulbs illuminate dark rooms, money buys health, keys open doors, and weapons are upgrades if they're blue or downgrades if they're red. Accidentally downgrading is easy, but the icons disappear quickly. The gun has eight levels that increase power, range, and spread. The whip (available later) has four levels and attacks through walls. To open the path onward, you find bosses inside interesting but easy first-person warehouse mazes. The bosses are detailed and have unique attack patterns, though you fight on a black background. Other Addams family members are in houses throughout the game and give Fester potions, missiles, and more. Hot dog stands refill health if you use money on them, but that's not indicated clearly. Many frustrations are solved by learning the game and using the manual. The art and graphics are good, and character renderings are faithful. The Sunsoftian music is arguably the best feature, and it elevates an otherwise lacking game.

Reflections: I have clear memories of renting *Fester's Quest* (or *Uncle Fester's Quest* on the title screen) multiple times and not getting far. The game looks good, and it sounds good, so doesn't that mean it's good? In retrospect, no! Grinding for weapons and those punishing enemy attacks that slow your movement make it frustrating. The manual actually says that using a turbo controller "with rapid fire feature will be quite helpful." When the instructions literally instruct you to get a cheating device, something's wrong! Yet it isn't a bad game; the continue system is fair, and the shooting and exploring is fun. But the tone of the game doesn't match the license. The idea of making Uncle Fester a video game hero is nuts. He was a likable character in the TV show and movies and doesn't seem like a commando. Just imagine *Fester's Quest: The Movie* starring Christopher Lloyd! – KN

Final Fantasy

Genre: RPG
Release Date: May 1990
Developer: Square
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⋆

Guide the Warriors of Light against evil knight Garland and restore the power of the four elemental orbs in this RPG featuring a party of four player characters. Characters are chosen from different classes such as Black Mage, Fighter, and Thief. The range of classes and their specialties really allow players to mold their party into something unique. Prefer blades and brute force? Use a Fighter. Willing to sacrifice power for the ability to heal in a pinch? Add in a White Mage. If a player wants to save money on equipment, then why not try a Black Belt, who gets bonuses for fighting barehanded? The initial balance of the whole unit will quickly dictate the challenge presented. Story is barely present, but the world feels fairly lively with a good number of NPCs and fairly memorable locations. Players will visit cities for clues and traverse overhead maps to various locations to find items or defeat boss monsters which will then let them proceed. Battles begin randomly, and the ease with which a party can dispatch the enemies lies in their health/attack/defense statistics, which are determined by level and weapons/armor equipped. Leveling up and preparing one's party is the chief focus of the game, so grinding for experience by fighting as many battles as possible is unavoidable, as is gaining enough money to purchase weapon/armor upgrades and needed items. Combat uses a basic turn-based system that allows players to choose the actions for each member of their party via menus for that round. These include FIGHT, DEFEND, and ITEM to browse various offensive and defensive items like potions or fangs that deal elemental damage. Specific characters can also have options based on their class which will contain special attacks or magic spells. There are some quirks, such as party members attacking empty spaces if an enemy is defeated before their turn, and the magic system that relies on a stock number of uses per spell level as opposed to the traditional Magic Points pooling system. These small issues aside, it's a great system that allows for excellent use of multiple strategies. The grinding, along with a fair bit of exploration due to less than descriptive instructions, will provide the bulk of either the fun or frustration for a player as they travel from caves to dungeons to towns. This is certainly full-featured, fairly large, and worth checking out for any fan of RPGs.

Reflections: Along with *Dragon Warrior*, this laid an important and solid foundation for console RPGs that's still in use decades later. Lack of inventiveness is hurting the genre, however, and reexamining how RPGs could be structured freshly is increasingly important. – IF

I never understood the "black belt" class. So you're telling me some medieval Karate guy is going to beat up werewolves with his fists? ... Actually, that does sound kind of cool. – PC

Fire 'n Ice

Genre: Action, Puzzle
Release Date: Mar. 1993
Developer: Tecmo
Publisher: Tecmo
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save, Edit Mode
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★★

In the prequel to *Solomon's Key*, Dana the magician must extinguish all the flames in single rooms to move on to the next. As Dana, the player can walk, climb onto adjacent blocks, and form ice blocks using his wand that will appear in the space adjacent and down one level to Dana. These ice blocks can be climbed onto if they are against an object already, or pushed until they hit another object. Dana can also use his wand to destroy ice blocks that are one space below and adjacent as well. The flames can be extinguished either by having ice blocks dropped on them, or by pushing an ice block into them. It's a simple concept, but the solutions to the room puzzles will require some inventive thought and strategy, involving using Dana's ice creating/destroying powers in creative ways. For example, destroying the two ice blocks on both sides of a block in the middle will drop the block with Dana on it. There is no time limit to levels nor any overall life limit. This is very helpful and encourages experimentation and continuing to play even if it seems too difficult to solve a stage at first. The enemy boss level of each world will require Dana to work his way up on the screen while eliminating the flames and avoiding monsters. A handy password feature will allow the player to come back and extinguish more rooms at their leisure. Presentation is very good, with cutscenes to tell the story, and there are world maps for each set of stages, where they can be selected and tackled in any order. Players can even try eliminating flames in stages they can create themselves! Nice graphics, animation, and music round out a very good puzzle game.

Reflections: I'm not the biggest puzzle game fan, but I cannot deny the fun factor here. I'm not sure why the game was not titled *Solomon's Key 2*, but I'm guessing it's because this game came out six years after the original, and the fact that this title has a noticeable lack of keys. Ha! I got a million of 'em! – PC

FireHawk

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: 1991
Developer: Codemasters
Publisher: Camerica
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★⋆

Players fly an Apache helicopter and must take out enemies while rescuing grounded troops in this overhead flying game. Each mission consists of the player taking off from an aircraft carrier and then flying to an enemy island. Players are armed to take out enemies, boats, and enemy helicopters and jets which all attack the player. The helicopter can fire back with a limited number of bullets and missiles. Extra bullets, missiles, as well as shield, weapon, fuel, and speed upgrades can be acquired from destroying the many ground targets available on each mission. Rescuing downed paratroopers is the objective of each level, and their location is provided via helpful directional arrows on the screen. Hovering above a troop waiting to be rescued will engage the rescue mini-game, a technically impressive third-person mode which has the copter hovering above the grounded troop, who will attempt to climb up a rope to the copter. The player must shoot down enemy helicopters approaching on either side while this is happening, via machine gun lock-on, which is fun and engaging. Rescued troops must be returned to the carrier in exchange for replenishing fuel, weapons, and shield. Gameplay is fun and challenging, sometimes too much so, as many ground and air enemies can overwhelm all at once, and maneuvering the Apache out of the way of fire isn't the easiest task.

Reflections: I'm always pleasantly surprised when I play *FireHawk*. It's a solid game with some interesting features, and flying around the islands keeps you on your toes as you will almost constantly be in peril, especially when tanks, planes, and copters are launching after you (take out their bases!). The rescue operations are usually tense, as sometimes the soldier on the ground takes a long time to get to the rope before even climbing up it – all the while you're trying to take out enemies while your ammo dwindles down. Applause to Codemasters on a nice title that's slightly reminiscent of the later *Desert Strike* series by Electronic Arts on the SNES and Genesis. – PC

Fisher-Price: Firehouse Rescue

Genre: Action
Release Date: Mar. 1992
Developer: Imagineering
Publisher: GameTek
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★⋆

In this children's game based upon the toy line, players take on the role of a fireman who drives a fire truck to save people trapped in houses. Play begins on an rudimentary overhead map maze. The goal is to maneuver the truck to the flashing house and press the A button. The game will then switch to a mini-mode of sorts, where the player controls the truck on a single side-scrolling screen and must position the fire truck's ladder underneath the window where a person appears to be rescued. When the ladder is lined up with the person in the house, pressing A will bring them down to the ground, where they will shuffle off. Up to three have to be rescued per house, one at a time, and then the stage will end and the next will begin. Everything here is simplistic, from the graphics to the controls, to the overall objective. Four levels of difficulty provide at least some challenge, with the second requiring the player to go to two houses, the third requiring two houses with a 50-second time limit to reach each, and the fourth being the same as the third level, except adding the caveat of having to find the key for each house before seeking it out. Even as a children's title, there is much to be desired. There are only a few stages to play for the four different levels, and in terms of educational value, there's none to be had. For a children's title, there's definitely not enough thought here in terms of gameplay, variety, or depth.

Reflections: Question: what exactly is our stalwart fireman saving these people from? There's not even a hint of smoke coming from these houses, let alone fire. So as far as I'm concerned, these Fisher-Price people are callling the fire department to come get them out of their houses because they lack hands to turn the doorknobs of their front doors. I also question the town planners, who decided that not only will our towns have many dead-end roads, but their economy has two houses of Fisher-Price people supporting one gas station and a generic "store." Now I'll be wondering the rest of the day what the limbless people of the Fisher-Price world need to buy there to keep themselves going. Obviously, socks aren't making the list. – PC

Fisher-Price: I Can Remember

Genre: Educational, Puzzle
Release Date: Mar. 1990
Developer: Beam Software
Publisher: GameTek
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★⋆

This is simply a slightly dressed-up version of the card game *Memory*, where players must match pairs of overturned cards. Players can play a solitaire mode or compete in a two-player mode against AI or a human opponent. Players are tasked to turn over cards to match the image on the face with another card. If they match, they get points and can go again. If they don't match, the next player tries. More points are awarded for earlier, more difficult (and sometimes luckier) matches, and the value for each match goes down as the remaining cards dwindle. Card images are objects children would be familiar with, like stacking rings, buses, and roller skates, which are easily distinguishable. A nice little touch is that as pairs are made and removed, a simple picture, like a cash register, begins to be revealed in the background. While the title does what it sets out to do, this isn't exactly a great achievement. The actual card game is cheaper and probably quicker to play without having to hear the "Old MacDonald" song over and over again. Parents who bought this likely lamented the money spent when they truly saw how basic it was and how little their children chose this over their more favored games. This title is entirely too simplistic, even for a children's game, and reeks of being a kiddy cash grab.

Reflections: I have tons of memories of this title. Homemade versions on index cards. Boxed versions out of a closet at my friend's house. Versions that came in a deck at my Grandma's dining room table. Never a video game adaptation because that's freakin' ridiculous. – IF

I was going to comment on this game, but the thought is escaping me right now. – PC

Fisher-Price: Perfect Fit

Genre: Educational
Release Date: Mar. 1990
Developer: Beam Software
Publisher: GameTek
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★

This simplistic game tasks the player to maneuver and place various objects like toys and letters one at a time onto a board that contains their silhouette. After a piece is successfully placed by a player, the next piece will drop down to be placed until all are completed on the board. After three rounds the game will end. Players may "compete" against another player to see who can complete the task the fastest. Or they may compete against the computer, which amounts to wasting a couple minutes of time while watching the AI struggle. Two additional levels of difficulty will require the player to flip the pieces horizontally and/or vertically before being able to fit them properly. It's unclear what exactly this game would teach even young children besides identification of pictures. Children that would be learning from this game are probably too young to be able to handle an NES controller to play in the first place.

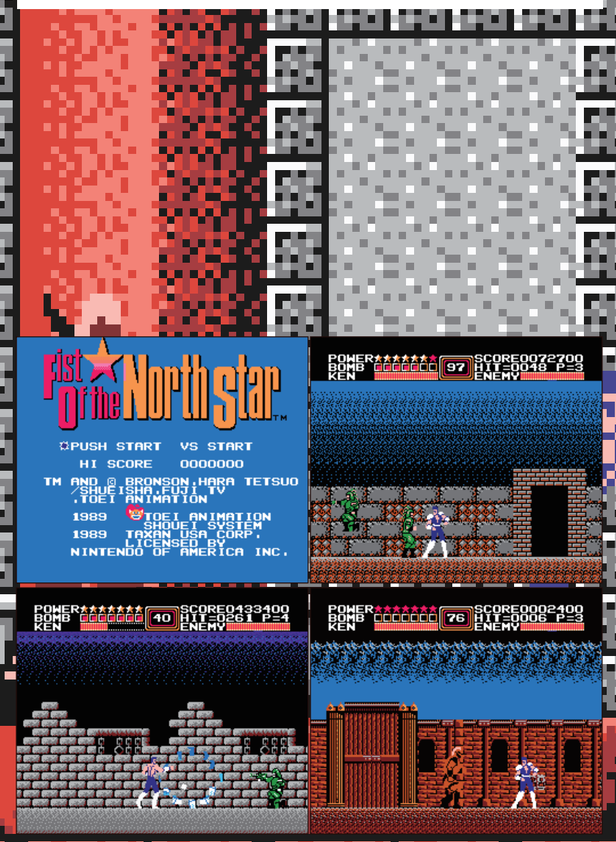
Reflections: Alright, I love Fisher-Price as much as the next guy. I loved playing the *Memory* card game where you matched animals with their babies, and I had many of the classic (and creepy) limbless toy characters, along with the castle, school bus, plane, and farm playset. These were garage sale purchases by my parents, but I loved them all the same. Although eventually I would convert the Fisher-Price castle to a fort to be used by my toy soldiers and G.I. Joe figures, I still look back on all those toys fondly. My point: you're better off seeking out some hand-me-down, dirty, used Fisher-Price toys for your children to play with versus seeking out this game. – PC

Fist of the North Star

Genre: Beat 'em Up
Release Date: Apr. 1989
Developer: Shouei System
Publisher: Taxan
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★⋆

Based on the Japanese anime/manga, the player takes control of the martial artist Ken. Battling thugs and enemies across eight side-scrolling levels, the player is armed with a kick that will propel enemies off the screen and a brutal punch attack that will cause the enemy to lurch and their body parts to explode (which occurred often in the source material). Ken can jump very high to the top of the screen, which is fun to do, especially when jump kicking. There are nice power-ups, including the collecting of stars that increase the speed of the player as well as give the punches and kicks rapid fire ability. When fully powered, the player can then attack with fireballs. The game is rough in terms of graphics and sound, and the gameplay is simple and monotonous, with the exception of figuring out the correct path to travel via doorways in a couple of levels, and the boss fights which are at least a little challenging and a change of pace from the rest of the fighting.

Reflections: I thought I was playing a Famicom game the first time I witnessed an enemy's guts exploding on my screen. How did this game make it past the dogmatic Nintendo of America censors? The graphics are very gaudy and almost hurt your eyes after a while (is that a ninja or a fish person?), but the machine gun punch/kicks are entertaining for a few minutes at least. – PC



Flight of the Intruder

***Phantom Air Mission** (PAL)*
Genre: Shooter, Simulation
Release Date: May 1991
Developer: Imagineering
Publisher: Mindscape
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★

Pilot the F-4 Phantom and A-6 Intruder jets in 12 missions set during the Vietnam War. Two types of combat are offered to entice the player: traditional cockpit dogfight sections where the player engages scaling 3D fighter jets and also third-person bombing runs to spice up the otherwise lackluster gameplay. The cockpit looks good and proper, but it is mainly there for show, aside from the handy radar available which is needed during combat. Gameplay consists of dispatching enemies as quickly as possible with your missiles and guns then moving on to the bombing stage. Here is where the action gets a little more intense as you are bombarded with constant gunfire. The game rarely becomes difficult though, as simply moving at all times will avoid everything coming at the player. Luckily the controls are tight and adept so death never feels cheap. Dodging the well-animated missiles and explosions can feel rewarding, but the "shoot and hope" nature of the section feels as if the game is aim assisting at times. The player is also tasked with taking off and landing the fighters in a side mini-game. It's a nice touch but ultimately falls flat, as repeating the whole scene becomes frustrating upon failure. On the whole, you never feel the "need for speed" or full throttle mayhem, which leaves the game wanting. There is a fair chunk of variety here and decent presentation, but dull gameplay and lack of focus on any particular mode leaves this pilot missing in action.

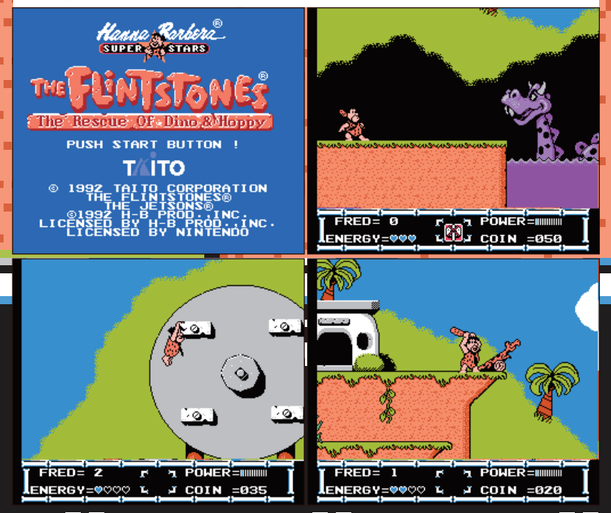
Reflections: *Intruder* tries and fails to be two games: *Top Gun* and *After Burner*. *Top Gun* isn't a great game in my opinion, but the marred mix of landings and similar style is definitely a nod to its four-year-old predecessor. The most fun did come from the *After Burner*-lite bombing section as there was always something to shoot or dodge, and it feels like more of a fun experience. The overall presentation is good, but I fear that it has tried to attempt to do too much, neglecting the sum of its parts. Jet fighter games need to feel fast and exciting, and this one simply isn't. – JE

The Flintstones: The Rescue of Dino & Hoppy

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Dec. 1991
Developer: Taito
Publisher: Taito
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

Based on the cartoon, Fred must retrieve pieces of Gazoo's time machine to travel to the future and rescue pets Dino and Hoppy in this refined action platformer. Fred will face cavemen, dinosaurs, and other prehistoric critters while fending them off with his club, which can be charged up with a meter for more power. Fred can pick up three secondary weapons (B + UP) that can be switched and used: throwing axe, slingshot, and an exploding dinosaur egg. Using these weapons will decrease the coins Fred has, which can be collected from defeated enemies. Other pickups include hearts to replenish health, increasing the number of maximum hearts, and increasing the maximum charge power for Fred's club. Fred also has the rare platforming ability to jump and grab ledges, and the ability to pull himself onto them or lower himself down. This ability allows some more creative level design, with many vertical areas to explore and little hidden areas tucked away. Enemy bosses are well designed and also reflect the fine graphics seen throughout the game. After defeating some levels, players will also be given the ability to call upon Gazoo to assist with three special abilities: flight, jumping high on top of a dinosaur, or diving (only in the lake level). These will use up coins and are usually optional, but using them will allow the player some freedom in how they tackle stages. Interactive objects in levels like treadmills, moving platforms being held by pterodactyls, and primitive ferris wheels make level progression and platforming fun without getting repetitive. Other niceties include an overhead map to allow Fred to move to stages and defeat them in an order he chooses to, and there are even bonus one-on-one basketball stages. The difficulty can be tough in some areas, especially due to the fact that Fred gets knocked back and is unusable for a couple of seconds, resulting in some cheap deaths. Also, the delay in Fred's club attack can make timing awkward at points. However, with nice presentation elements, fine music, and top-notch use of the property license, this title will provide some Yabba-Dabba fun for fans of platformers.

Reflections: I'm not a big fan of *The Flintstones* cartoon. It always rubbed me the wrong way, even as a child, when I saw episodes that included a laugh track. Huh? Was there a live studio audience there while the show was being animated and edited together? The character of Fred never appealed much to me, which is funny, since I think *The Honeymooners* show is brilliant, and *The Flintstones*' characters and structure were based on that legendary and seminal sitcom. I guess you can get some mileage out of prehistoric machinery, but there's only so many times you can chuckle at a frustrated animal slaving away inside the Flintstones household. – PC



The Flintstones: The Surprise at Dinosaur Peak

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Aug. 1994
Developer: Taito
Publisher: Taito
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Rare
★★★★

In this platformer sequel, Fred and Barney must rescue their cartoon children, who are trapped behind a waterfall of lava, by traveling to Dinosaur Peak. The player controls Barney and Fred both at the same time, and can swap out one for the other on the fly via the Select button. Fred is armed with a powerful clubbing attack (which can be charged up) to whack the prehistoric enemies, and has the ability to climb and lower himself from ledges. He also can gain and use a secondary weapon via B + UP (bowling ball or stone throwing axe). Barney is armed with a weaker but long-ranged slingshot and can climb, dangle, and hand-walk on horizontal poles. Power-ups include replenishing life (hearts), increasing health bar length, and collecting stars to earn extra lives. As one of the last NES releases, the graphics, sounds, and stage design are all well done. The levels are extremely varied, involving standard side-scrolling action with a good amount of interaction with stage elements, but other level types break up the action, like vehicle stages where the player can surf or ride on a pterodactyl in the air in a simple shooter stage. There are even a couple of bonus one-on-one sports stages (soccer and basketball) to keep it fresh. There are some very challenging but inventive moments in the game where the player must switch from Barney/Fred to the other while in the middle of the action in order to proceed forward. However, there are other areas, such as where Fred must run to avoid a large boulder, where the difficulty involves too much trial and error and a little too much chance versus skill. There's also frustration due to the fact that getting hit will knock Fred/Barney back a couple steps and the player will not recover for a couple of seconds. Fortunately, there are continues offered to alleviate the frustration somewhat, but this polished title will prove tough either way.

Reflections: Taito was holding it down during the twilight NES years of 1992-1994, releasing very good action-platformers such as this, *Panic Restaurant*, *The Jetsons*, and *Little Samson*. It seems that by this point Taito had mastered the NES capabilities and was putting their all into their development, so it's a shame that these titles didn't get much of a production run due to the rise of the SNES. It is conjecture that this title was never released in retail stores due to most (if not all) of the copies originally being found from Blockbuster/movie rental stores. While this is a possibility, there is no hard evidence that this game was rental only, although the very limited number of copies that exist could point to that. At the end of the day, only OCD collectors like myself care about this sort of meaningless crap. – PC

Flying Dragon: The Secret Scroll

Genre: Action, Fighting
Release Date: Aug. 1989
Developer: Culture Brain
Publisher: Culture Brain
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

This side-scrolling fighting game features a young man named Ryuhi who was raised in the mountains of China and trained in the art of Kempo by his mentor, Juan. When Juan is attacked and robbed of the Secret Scrolls of Hiyru-No-Ken by the Tusk Soldiers, Juan entrusts Ryuhi with the sixth and final scroll, known as the *Shingan No Sho* (*Book of the Mind's Eye*), which he had hidden from his assailants, and implores his student to seek out Gengai, the bishop of Shorinji to complete his training. The game features two different modes of play, the first being a side-scrolling Journey level in which Ryuhi must defeat enemies and obtain power-ups. The player can jump and crouch and has two basic attacks, a punch and a kick, which can be upgraded with improved speed and short-range projectiles by defeating mini bosses along the way. The objective is to defeat said bosses within the level, the last of whom possesses a key to exit the stage. The second mode is a one-on-one fighting sequence where the player must alternately attack and defend against an opponent on a single, horizontal plane by following a series of red targets that appear on both fighters. As the mode progresses, Gengai instructs the player on how to use new techniques, such as the Trick Throw. If Ryuhi fails to defeat any of his opponents, he must repeat the sequence until he is successful. While simple in theory, this mode is actually quite challenging and requires fairly sharp reflexes to complete. This combination of side-scrolling action and one-on-one fighting may not be the most refined, but the intertwining of gameplay modes offers something a little unique.

Reflections: A unique blend of side-scrolling action and tournament fighter, *Flying Dragon* is, at the very least, an ambitious sort of game. Unfortunately, the very basic move set and staccato-like movement make it vastly inferior to games like *Kung Fu*, which has far better gameplay. Though not a terrible fighting game by any means, it's hard to recommend it when there are better choices on the NES. – JP

Flying Warriors

Genre: Action-RPG, Fighting
Release Date: Feb. 1991
Developer: Culture Brain
Publisher: Culture Brain
Players: 1-8 (2 simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★⯪

A side-scrolling fighting game with RPG elements, this sequel to *Flying Dragon* follows a group of fighters (Rick Stalker, Hayato Go, Mary Lynn, Gregg Cummings, and Jimmy Cutler Jr.) who set out to defeat the evil lord Demonyx. The game features two modes of play. In Story mode, you must guide Rick Stalker through a series of side-scrolling action stages. Rick has a basic punch and a kick, both of which can be used while jumping. By defeating foes, Rick gains experience points and will eventually level up, becoming stronger. He can also collect numerous items throughout each stage, like Magic Water to restore his health and Mirrors to deflect attacks. He can acquire spells by collecting different swords, and at times may call upon his companions to aid him in combat. Another feature of the game is the KO meter, which increases by defeating enemies. Once full, it allows Rick to unleash a powerful projectile attack. In critical boss fights, the game shifts into a traditional RPG format with Rick's actions determined by a menu system. In Tournament mode, players enter a one-on-one, single-plane fighting arena and must attempt to beat their opponents by following a series of targets that appear on both combatants for both attacking and defending (high, middle, low). The controls can be awkward in the side-scrolling levels, since jumping is mapped to both the A button and the D-pad. Furthermore, the controls in Tournament mode are not very responsive, making it difficult to hit an opponent even when following the targets. Nevertheless, the enhanced graphics and use of RPG elements make it slightly more interesting than the first game in the series, and an extra one-on-one tournament mode with up to eight players (with several types of fighters) is a nice bonus.

Reflections: As the sequel to *Flying Dragon*, *Flying Warriors* had an opportunity to improve on its predecessor a good deal, but it seems to be only marginally better than the first game. The role-playing elements are unique in a game of this type, but the controls definitely could have used some extra work here for an even greater chance of improvement. – JP

Formula One: Built to Win

Genre: Racing
Release Date: Nov. 1990
Developer: Winky Soft
Publisher: SETA
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★⯪

This is an impressively deep and full-featured racing game that tasks you with becoming the greatest F1 driver in the world. Beginning with a Mini Cooper, you can slowly upgrade to a Vector W2, a Ferrari F40, and eventually, an F1 race car. Almost all of the races in the game are accessed through a rough map of the United States. There are 10 locations with three races each. The cities can be visited at any time, but their racing events may be gated off if you don't have the proper license. The main game then becomes about completing all of the lowest ranked races to level up and earn money to spend on better car parts. Tires, suspension, and chassis are just a few of the things that can be improved. Shops won't always have parts for every category, so it is important to check the stores in each city. Las Vegas even has a playable slot machine that can help accelerate earnings. After the US has been swept, the game enters the final stretch: 16 international F1 races. All of the actual racing is great, featuring smooth, simple controls. Graphically, the game is admirable; nothing exactly stands out, but most of the courses have some sort of individuality due to the mixing of background images and colors. When you play Normal Mode, the courses have two types of cars on them: blue for rival racers and green for civilian traffic. While the latter is just a minor obstacle, the other racers aggressively (and a little cheaply) try to block you from passing. It's easiest to get around them on the turns, which along with good controls, makes the curves of any track the most fun place to be. This truly is an addictive title that works by keeping the racing accessible while loading up on customization.

Reflections: I know almost nothing about real-life racing; I don't like to drive. Something about racing games gives me a thrill, though, and I think there is a universally understood rush from a race. This title was released in 1990, and with its plethora of upgrades, tracks, and different vehicle types, it paved the way for important racing games later on, such as the PlayStation's *Gran Turismo* (1998). I'm incredibly surprised that a title this good has remained more or less under the radar, even today. – IF

Frankenstein: The Monster Returns

Genre: Action
Release Date: July 1991
Developer: TOSE
Publisher: Bandai
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★⯪

In this horror-themed side-scroller, you control a self-named hero tasked with defeating the titular fiend and rescuing Emily, the village elder's daughter. You begin equipped with your fists and a jump kick, but will permanently acquire swords at the end of the first and third levels. Certain defeated monsters also drop weapons, like clubs and slings, that can be picked up to increase your attack's strength/range. Taking a hit causes you to drop these weapons, but they are retrievable. Enemies also drop hearts to replenish your life meter, blue potions that fill your life meter and add an extra unit to it, an orb that adds a projectile to your weapon, etc. Additionally, you will find or receive chests that contain a three-way projectile, a bomb, a key, or a jar of life, which you can store and use at will to replenish your health. With these weapons and items, you take on four levels, each with unique re-spawning enemies, terrain, traps, sub-bosses and bosses. The first is the desolate village, with rooms and a sewer to enter, trolls and purple doppelgängers, a water dragon mini-boss, and an arrogant demon horse boss. Next, you enter the woods, with life-sucking blobs, a giant, climbable tree, a possessed forest-spirit, and Medusa. The third level has hopping headstones and lightning-wielding demons to avoid on the way to a castle with hidden rooms, gladiator statues that come to life, and a Dark Warrior boss. Upon vanquishing him, he helps you travel to the Evil Dimension, Frankenstein's creepy, visceral domain where you will first fight the Manwolf and the Vampire before facing Frankenstein's two forms. This game is short and difficult, and it suffers a bit from hit detection issues. As you play, however, you will learn to compensate for them, finding a great variety of obstacles and monsters to keep your interest in the process.

Reflections: Words speak loudly in this action title, and I found myself stopping to read a lot during gameplay. I got dialogue from friendly people, from bosses before and after I beat them, and even in the form of inter-level gibes from Ol' Franky himself. It's kind of neat to find out that some bosses actually want to see Frankenstein destroyed and Emily rescued, and that several admired my martial prowess. But it made for an awkward moment when I came across the swordsman atop the tall tree in level two. He's a fellow adventurer, and he gave me a chest with a blue potion inside to aid in my quest. But as he told me how he, "the great Blademaster," had tragically incurred a fatal wound at the hooves of the horse demon, I thought, "You mean that conceited centaur I whipped not five minutes ago? Um... yeah. Sorry about that. Thanks for the freebie, though." – AP

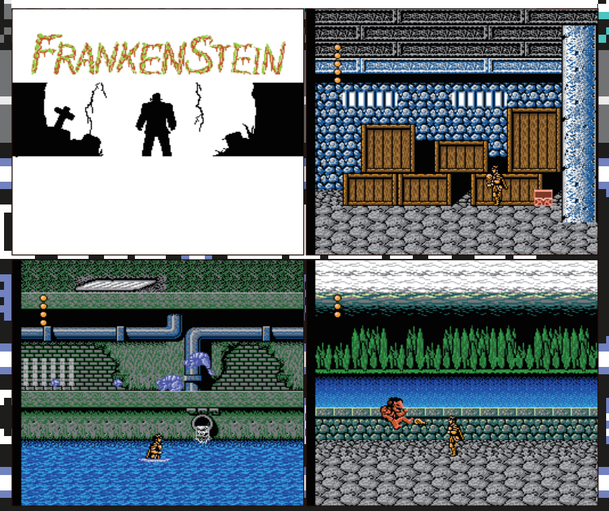
Freedom Force

Genre: Shooting Gallery
Release Date: Apr. 1988
Developer: Sunsoft
Publisher: Sunsoft
Players: 1-2
Special Features: Zapper (required)
Type: Licensed:
Availability: Common
★★★⯪

In this first-person shooter, players take on the role of Rad Rex to take down a terrorist attack at an airport through four stages before tackling the enemy hideout. The screen scrolls horizontally, and using the Zapper, the player has to shoot at terrorists who will fire at them after stepping into view in an airplane door, from behind a column, in a building window, etc. The player has a health bar, and if the player doesn't shoot the terrorist in time, part of the player's health bar will be reduced. Some enemies toss grenades or fire rockets at the player, but these projectiles can be shot down before reaching the player. Stages end after a certain number of terrorists are shot. Civilians and hostages also appear in the stages. If six are shot overall, the game will restart on the first stage. Players are given only one life, and the reaction time required for taking out terrorists before being shot at is very quick. This is exacerbated when multiple enemies appear at once, and/or when they are armed with machine guns, which could mean a quick death. Quick reflexes and steady aim are required to have any chance at all due to the difficulty. Health is replenished infrequently at point intervals or when the health icon flashes at the bottom right and is shot. However, this appears and disappears far too quickly, especially when the player is dealing with terrorists. In the same spot, additional ammo and two weapon power-ups are available: .44 Magnum and rocket launcher. The Magnum increases the shot spread and shooting the rocket launcher icon will eliminate all enemies on screen (and civilians). An interesting "code breaker challenge" bonus stage is available, where players have to guess a word by shooting letters. After defeating the five stages, the player will be given a secret word and the stages will repeat. If the player cycles through three times without dying, they'll have the three needed secret words to send away for a free* self-adhesive decal set (via manual)! With some nice graphics/animation and a good challenge, this shooter may not be perfect, but gets the job done.

Reflections: The opening cutscene to the game is very well animated and somewhat intense, featuring a terrorist destroying a helicopter with a rocket launcher. As bloodless as it is, it's pretty graphic for an NES game. It's almost quaint to see an anti-terrorist game on the NES where the bad guys take hostages.

*Add $1 for postage and handling. It's interesting that there are aspects of NES games that are still new to me, even as I write for this book. I had no clue about the *Freedom Force* decal set before diving into the manual and seeing it. Does anyone out there own a set? – PC

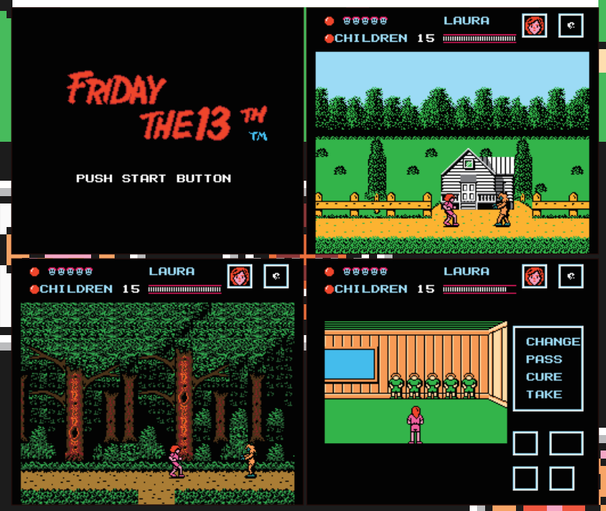


Friday the 13th

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: Feb. 1989
Developer: Atlus
Publisher: LJN
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed:
Availability: Common
★★

Based on the slasher film series, this game puts you in control of six camp counselors (George, Mark, Paul, Laura, Debbie, and Crissy) who must protect themselves and 15 young campers from Jason Voorhees, the hockey-masked murderer. You begin by selecting a counselor, each varying in speed, jumping ability, and starting position, to explore Camp Crystal Lake in a side-scrolling fashion. Pressing start brings up a map, depicting paths, small and large cabins, a cave, wooded areas, and the lake itself. Each counselor is initially equipped only with rocks, but throwing knives, as well as keys and health-replenishing vitamins, can be found at random by hopping along the paths. Eventually, you'll get stronger projectile weapons, like machetes, axes, and pitchforks, either by finding them or by defeating the disembodied head of Jason's mother in the cave. Other enemies include zombies, crows, wolves, and Jason himself, who can strike at any time, wields various weapons, and must be hit repeatedly to reduce his life bar and make him leave. Completely emptying Jason's life bar three times, once per day, wins the game. As you wander the campsite, you will pass many cabins that can be entered. This puts the viewpoint behind your counselor in third person, who now, regardless of their usual speed, moves and turns in a very slow, stilted fashion. Entering small cabins allows you to switch counselors or give weapons/vitamins to another counselor, while large cabins have fireplaces that must be lit, using a lighter obtained from a zombie, in order to get the powerful torch weapon and the flashlight for use in the cave. Large cabins also contain cryptic hints about things like exploring the woods or cave, both of which are maze-like and somewhat easy to get lost in. Frequently during gameplay, the counters in the upper left corner blink and a beep sounds repeatedly, warning that Jason is attacking a fellow counselor or the children in the lakeside cabins. Since the game ends if all counselors/all children die, you must row across the lake or travel on the ground to save the kids, or switch to the beleaguered counselor to fend off Jason. If more than 60 seconds pass, Jason's victims die. While Jason's surprise appearances can be genuinely scary at times, this game, down to the music, is mostly tedious and repetitive, and the frequent interruptions caused by the beeping alerts are obnoxious at best.

Reflections: Every time I take a look at the map screen, I wonder: what is it with these counselors and their ridiculous grins? Don't they know they're gonna get iced by Hell's goalie? Take George, for instance. He already moves more like he's in molasses than mortal terror, and there he is, sporting a sunny smile. There's a supernatural slasher on a rampage, George, so wipe that smile off your face, or I'm sure Jason will do it for you... with a machete. – AP



Fun House

Genre: Action
Release Date: Jan. 1991
Developer: Ironwind Software, Realtime Associates
Publisher: Hi Tech Expressions
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★

Based on the children's game show in name only, this overhead action game puts the player on inline skates, and the objective is to skate around and shoot targets with tomatoes and grab a key to exit the room before time runs out. Players can rotate left/right (an arrow on the top of the player's head points to the forward direction), while A moves the player forward and B fires the short-range tomatoes. Some targets are unnumbered and can be destroyed when you come across them, but there are also sequentially numbered ones that must be destroyed in a certain order. When the last target is destroyed, a key will appear where it was, and when grabbed will advance the player to the next room. The enemies players must contend with include bouncing blobs that will bounce you around when hit, "boingers" which can spin the player out of control, and banana launchers and rotating gun turrets, whose shots will not only send players back but also subtract time off the clock. Item pick-ups include clocks for more time, coins to earn extra lives, points, sneakers to increase speed, and warps that can be found to skip rooms. The gameplay is simple and works fine, although the only real variety in levels seems to be floor coverings, like goo, slippery ice and treadmills. Challenge stems mostly from not knowing where the targets are and searching them out while having to deal with the time limits. Visually, the game is very simplistic, and the connection to the property the game is based upon is nonexistent, with only the show's host appearing on screen in-between rooms. This is a good example of a game that's functional, but not really fun, regardless of its name.

Reflections: I used to really enjoy the *Fun House* television game show, which was like the syndicated cousin of *Double Dare*. The show consisted of trivia and physical "stunts" that were more elaborate than the "physical challenges" of *Double Dare*, as well as an obstacle course the kids would run through. However, the real selling point of the show was the Fun House itself: a multi-level, complex playground structure with different themed rooms that the players would scramble through for cash and prizes. There was actually an element of danger involved, so the contestants had to wear helmets and elbow/knee pads. I wish I could have run through it just for fun! The losing team would always get Gitano jeans and clothes, which is about as late '80s as you can get. If you want to experience a video game version that tries to emulate the game show, check out the DOS one. My sister also once dated a redhead who happened to look like host J.D. Roth. I'm almost positive it wasn't the same guy. – PC

G.I. Joe

Genre: Run and Gun Shooter
Release Date: Jan. 1991
Developer: KID
Publisher: Taxan
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★★

G.I. Joe must tackle the evil Cobra organization over six missions in this run and gun shooter. There are five main team members, three of which are playable on each mission (one captain and the player's choice of two others). Team members vary in their jump height, default health meter length, projectile weapon attack strength, and melee attack strength (sword, knife, or punch). During play, pressing select will switch between weapon and hand-to-hand mode, with B + UP throwing unlimited grenades when in hand-to-hand mode. Missions are split into three parts, with the player taking out Cobra foot soldiers, ninjas, drones, and more as they progress to an enemy boss, which is usually a large vehicle or a specialized Cobra enemy. One of the levels of each mission will be a timed one where several explosives have to be placed in specific locations before finding the exit. Just about every enemy and vehicle in the game is taken from the TV cartoon show, comics, and/or toy line. Gameplay is fantastic, having great controls with players given the ability to play to their own and their selected characters' strengths as they see fit. The ability to fire in four directions and even cling/jump from walls on some levels accentuates the degree of control on display. Items include ones to extend the health meter, limited invincibility, rations for more health, and ones to increase the amount of fire and spread of the weapons. These are uniquely tracked for each Joe, so players can build up their preferred character(s) as they see fit, although bullets are shared between all three members on a mission. Every now and then, players can even jump in and use a Cobra vehicle, like a gyrocopter. Graphics and music are both top notch, and nice cutscenes propel the story. It's an outstanding use of the G.I. Joe license and a true highlight of the NES library.

Reflections: I'm a huge fan of the '80s *G.I. Joe* cartoon (and toys). It was very smart and written for adults as well as for children. It still holds the record for the highest number of recurring characters of any animated series. The show did a great job (as did the comics and toy line) of giving all the characters a distinct personality and backstory, like Barbecue being an Irish-American firefighter from Boston, or Quick Kick, the Asian-American stuntman/martial artist who would quote John Wayne movies. Now, this game is not based upon the original *G.I. Joe* Sunbow-produced cartoon from 1983-1986 (with the 1987 movie send-off), but rather the inferior follow-up DIC series from 1989, which unfortunately threw out almost all the older characters. The original cartoon did a much better job with storylines, characters, voice acting, animation – everything. What I'm trying to say before I write 10,000 words is that if the game was produced based upon the original cartoon, it would be one of my favorite games. Since it's not, I never really play it, even though it's still great. – PC

G.I. Joe: The Atlantis Factor

Genre: Run and Gun Shooter
Release Date: Mar. 1992
Developer: KID
Publisher: Capcom
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

The G.I. Joe team must again defeat the evil Cobra in this run and gun shooter. Players begin as General Hawk, who has both a punch and machine gun to start. Other members of the Joe team can be unlocked by defeating certain stages of the game. Players can select up to three Joe members for each stage that can be played, with each having their own starting health bar length, jumping height, and special ability. For example; Duke can fire up and down, Wet Suit can travel underwater, and Storm Shadow and Snake Eyes have a sword for their melee attack. On an overhead map, players can select which route to traverse to reach Cobra headquarters, providing some freedom of play. Stages are one of two types: a shorter, more straightforward one where players will retrieve a radio, or a more elaborate base stage where the Joes will have to complete a task like planting explosives or rescuing hostages before taking on an enemy boss. During gameplay, players can switch to other Joes (who all have independent health bars). However, all members of the team share the same bullets. Characters start with a default machine gun, but it can power up to a laser gun and a missile launcher, which will use more bullets per shot. By collecting "POW" symbols throughout the levels, players can level up the melee and weapon attacks for each individual Joe, up to four per attack type per Joe. Likewise, the maximum health bar can be increased for each Joe via power-ups. This amount of freedom in building the team is undermined by the game itself though, which is underwhelming and frustrating. Enemy types are very limited, consisting mostly of a few different foot soldiers and slowly moving flying mines. Bullet ammo is far too scarce, especially given how weak the attacks are, and also due to the fact that enemies will annoyingly respawn if the player returns to the same spot. A difficulty imbalance is also present in the mid-level and main bosses, who are very difficult if underpowered, but are somewhat easy if the Joes' weapons are fully powered. The level design is uninspired, with too many areas where the player will simply and boringly move forward and shoot soldiers. While there are some nice touches, like the ability to radio Joes to revive fallen comrades and replenish health, the design elements as a whole seem to be on auto-pilot, and the final product suffers as a result.

Reflections: What an unfortunate and disappointing step down from the fantastic original. Gone are the cool vehicles, unique weapons for each character, nice cutscenes, and interesting villains – not to mention the much more boring bosses of the sequel. I'd love to know the story about how/why this happened. Were there less resources for the development? Maybe it was the "sophomore curse"? Either way, it's a shame. – PC

Galactic Crusader

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: 1990
Developer: Sachen
Publisher: Bunch Games
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★

As an inexplicable butterfly spaceship, the player must kill anything that moves in this upbeat vertically scrolling shooter. Enemies cascade down the screen in a myriad of scattered formations, and the player is tasked with wiping them out. Downed UFOs occasionally drop capsules that contain different shot types, such as lasers, spirals, and waves; these can be stacked if another pellet of the same color is picked up. Option craft add-ons can also be snagged to bring their own firepower, act as a bullet sponge shield, or be jettisoned into a crowd of enemies for higher damage. An underwhelming boss fight greets the end of each stage, but it's a welcome change from shooting the same also-ran baddies. In a neat departure from typical space shooter mechanics, the player's ship can take three hits rather than just losing a life, and it can also collect ship parts to increase the hit count. The game doesn't really do anything wrong (aside from the music not matching the subject matter). It moves at a fair clip and is pretty enjoyable, but in a sea of spacey shooter bang-bang games, it is merely a footnote.

Reflections: Considering this is a dreaded unlicensed Color Dreams game, it does a pretty good job of actually being playable. The game name is wasted, however; *Galactic Crusader* connotes some pretty hefty gravitas, but it doesn't really deliver anything worthy of such a grand title. Saying that, what more can you do with a generic starry background and even more generic enemy list? Make the ship a butterfly, of course, for reasons that are beyond me! All jokes aside, the game plays well but doesn't do anything that hasn't been done before. It has the hallmark bleeps and bloops of any space shooter out there, and the '80s/'90s scene was awash with them. – JE

Galaga

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Sept. 1988
Developer: Namco
Publisher: Bandai
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

The classic wave-based arcade shooter gets a very faithful port on the NES. The main theme that plays when you start a game is catchy, and while the sound effects are basic, they have a perfect arcade feel. Gameplay takes place from a vertical overhead perspective, with players being able to move horizontally on the bottom of the screen. Controls are tight and responsive, allowing eagle-eyed players to make shots against the alien ships that swoop in from the top of the screen and fire at the player. The main objective is to take down the increasingly speedy and hypnotic swirls of invaders to progress to the next level, and this becomes quite addicting. Every few levels a "Challenging Stage" bonus round will occur that tests the player's accuracy and awards big points for shooting every enemy before they fly off screen. If you have a ship in reserve, you can let the Boss Galaga capture you with its tractor beam. If you shoot it down with the next ship you'll get double the firepower! A simple and timeless game.

Reflections: By the time this was released on the NES, it likely seemed quite simple, but the title had never been done justice on a popular console before. The Atari 2600 couldn't handle it, and while the Atari 7800 received a port, it was as forgotten as the system itself. I've always laughed at the tacked on U.S. subtitle "Demons of Death" that I'm assuming was an attempt to make it sound cooler. It's obvious we're fighting space bugs here, people! – IF

The *Galaga* double-ship may be one of the biggest losers in terms of risk/reward in videogame history. Yes, it may double your firepower, but it also doubles the width of your ship, making it a lot easier to get hit (it's not like you strafe that quickly to begin with). Whenever I attempt to get the double-ship, I either 1) get killed trying to even get to that point or 2) lose the double-ship within 15 seconds of getting it. I welcome all the heated yelling all you *Galaga* experts are most likely spewing at the page right now, but guess what, I can't hear you! – PC

Galaxy 5000: Racing in the 51st Century

Genre: Racing, Action
Release Date: Feb. 1991
Developer: Activision
Publisher: Activision
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★⋆

In this futuristic racing game, the player takes control of a hovering turbocraft in an isometric perspective against three others around courses set in the middle of space. The hovercrafts are armed with weapons like lasers, missiles, and bombs to take out obstacles and the other racers, and they can jump around the course to avoid obstacles (laser gates, stalagmites, spikes, etc.) or to take shortcuts on the track. Gameplay takes place on 36 different tracks over nine planets, with the planets featuring different gravity. The controls are very good and even allow for two different steering options: one traditionally fixed or one that changes dependent on the direction the racer is facing. The courses aren't too complex, but they're nicely designed. Damaged craft can be repaired after races with money earned, or players can upgrade their vehicle. Vehicle upgrades (five different models) include better performance with added weapon upgrades. On the courses, players can collect star pick-ups to earn more money, repair the turbocraft, and gain the special weapons for that specific turbocraft, making it a fun experience. The quirky tone is nice, the music is solid, and the voice samples are humorous and some of the best the NES has to offer. For an off-beat and solid combat racing game, pop this cartridge in and give it a spin.

Reflections: This is a strange but alluring game. It's too bad that the vehicles can only be upgraded all at once and not specific parts like in *Super Off Road*, as that would have been very nice. A map would have been great to have too, although the courses generally are just a circular shape anyway. Minor gripes aside, it was a fine effort by Activision, and points awarded for trying something different. – PC

Gargoyle's Quest II

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Oct. 1992
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★⋆

In this prequel to the Game Boy original, Firebrand is sent to investigate an evil black light that has descended on the land and defeat the perpetrator, King Breager. The game is predominantly a side-scrolling platformer, interspersed with a top-down RPG overworld which acts as a vehicle to progress the story. Immediately you're hit by a quality soundtrack and then double-whammied with sumptuous graphics; Firebrand is particularly well animated. The controls are perfect in jumping, flying, and shooting fireballs – they need to be as the game is unforgiving as the action rarely stops. The challenge is strong but fair, and only occasionally does the game feel like it's "cheating." The odd leap of faith sometimes rears its ugly head, but thankfully there is a health item in place rather than instant death. New powers open up impassable areas, create temporary mid-air platforms and even allow Firebrand to stick to spikes. Finding vials allow the player to purchase extra lives which are needed in the later levels. The stages are standard fantasy fare: forests, lava bridges, castles, and caves, but they are executed with aplomb. The overworld is particularly bland and empty, however. There's nothing to do except find vials and get lost, with no random battles to keep you engaged on the journey to the next town. The bestiary of ghouls, wizards, and lumpy things that all succumb to Firebrand's fireballs are varied and interesting. One ghoul late in the game carries a candle and, if killed, the entire screen (including HUD) goes black – one example of the game's lovely touches. The gameplay rarely lets up, keeping the player on edge. Add that to the beautiful stages with their own bespoke enemies and music, and it makes for an absolute masterclass in gaming.

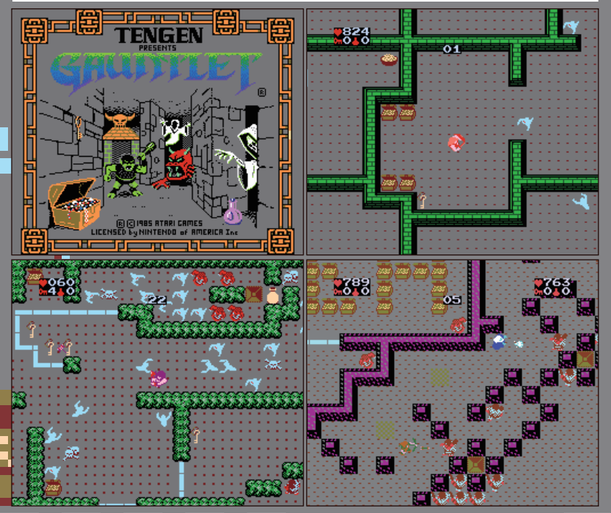
Reflections: It is the attention to detail that really makes the game special – some enemies are just blob monsters with eyes but even they have character. The references to *Ghosts 'n Goblins* are subtle welcome Easter eggs (besides the glaring fact that you are the mid-stage jerk boss from its first level), and even small things like enemy explosion animations are a nod to its older Capcom cousin. The overworld could have been replaced with a *Super Mario Bros. 3* map screen, giving more action than traction. Ironically, Firebrand speeds along on the map screen but during the platforming, he trudges along like his loincloth is filled with pudding. They are but niggles, however, as the game is Capcom at its best. Watch your back Blue Bomber! – JE

Gauntlet

Genre: Action
Release Date: July 1988
Developer: Atari Games
Ported by: Tengen
Publisher: Tengen
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed / Unlicensed
Availability: Common
★★★⯪

The evil Morak has stolen the Sacred Orb, and the player must retrieve it by traveling through dozens of dungeon rooms filled with monsters. The player(s) begins by selecting their character(s), who vary in their speed, armor, melee/projectile attacks, and magic ability. Thor the Warrior has strong attacks, but has slow foot speed and projectile speed. Thyra the Valkyrie is well-rounded and has the strongest armor. Merlin the Wizard is the slowest and weakest in armor and hit points, but is average in attacks and strongest with magic. Finally, Questor the Elf is the quickest but has weak attacks and moderate magic ability. Gameplay takes place in an overhead perspective, with the player tasked to find one of the room exits to move on. Enemies such as ghosts, grunts, demons, and sorcerers will chase after and attack the player. Enemy generators will continually create more enemies, so players will have to destroy them. Either way, it's typical to have a dozen or more enemies charging after the player(s). Keys in levels are needed to unlock white doors, but may be held to also open closed treasure chests. Blocks of walls may also be shot out to advance in areas, and stepping on flashing floor tiles can make walls disappear. Bombs can be collected for one-time use, and their effectiveness in clearing the screen of enemies is based upon the magic strength of the player. Other power-ups include increasing speed or strength or granting special powers for a limited time. Treasure chests litter the rooms, and collecting enough increases players' maximum health. Levels are not timed, but health points constantly decrease. Food and drink may be found to restore health, and it all is restored by exiting bonus treasure rooms within the time limit. It's a very challenging experience, especially as players get deeper into rooms and take on more and more dangers, like having to deal with acid pools and the Death enemy who cannot be killed. Players also have to find and record an eight-character code by successfully completing eight clue rooms to eventually end the quest. It's a simple monster-fighting experience, but there's some depth and surprising complexity here, along with some nice dungeon tunes, all masked in a high difficulty curve.

Reflections: This is great to play if you are a fan of the arcade cab, which was the first to feature four players teaming up. The great arcade voice samples are absent here ("Elf shot the food!"), but the mildly inappropriate groans from finding food remain. I usually choose the Elf due to his quickness, but at times I select the Valkyrie, if for nothing else than for being able to role play as someone wearing an armored bra. EDITOR'S NOTE: Remove potentially embarrassing statement about armored bra before going to print. – PC



Gauntlet II

Genre: Action
Release Date: Sept. 1990
Developer: Atari Games
Ported by: Tengen
Publisher: Mindscape
Players: 1-4 (simultaneous)
Special Features: NES Four Score / Satellite compatible
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⯪

Take up the sword, axe, or bow, and navigate dozens of labyrinthine levels in this conversion of the 1986 Atari coin-op. Whether you choose to go it alone or adventure with up to three friends, there's a lot of fun to be had picking up treasure and taking down an assortment of enemies while looking for the level exit. Collecting keys to open doors is important in finding treasure or items, while obtaining and saving destructive potions for just the right time can be the difference between life and death. Your hit points constantly dwindle, so you need to find food in each level to replenish health, but remember: Don't shoot food! The levels themselves also work against you. Layouts and exit locations change, and each level is a maze that isn't always obvious to navigate. Stepping on certain tiles can lower trick walls, while other barriers can be shot and destroyed for access to areas that seem blocked off. Teleporters can be confusing to understand in terms of where they send you. Then there are the enemies: grunts, demons, sorcerers, and even Death itself stand in the way of progress, and some require more than just brute force to overcome. The controls are responsive and easy to learn. Graphically, the game retains its top-down perspective from the coin-op original. There may be some slowdown from time to time when the screen gets busy, but it's acceptable. Each of the four character classes (warrior, valkyrie, elf, wizard) are easy to identify on the screen. There isn't a lot of music here, but many of the sound effects and voice samples are lifted right from the coin-op. This is one adventure that's definitely worth taking. How many levels will you find, Red Warrior?

Reflections: The NES has its fair share of coin-op conversions, and *Gauntlet II* is a good one. It's a little bit easier than its arcade cousin, but this is offset by the fact that you can't keep adding health once your hit points get too low. What really stands out to me is the quality of the sound samples that made the trip from the coin-op. They're not as clean or as frequent as heard in the arcade original, but what's here is quite impressive. Knowing which player shot food or a potion so that you can yell at them always makes for a fun time. – PS

Gemfire

Genre: Strategy
Release Date: Mar. 1992
Developer: Koei
Publisher: Koei
Players: 1-2
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★★

Each of six crown jewels is controlled by warring factions out to claim the land as theirs and rescue the princess in this turn-based strategy game. Four different scenarios are available and act as a difficulty. Each of the selectable families has individual stats such as attack strength, political ability, and charm, which define their play style. Attack strength focuses on armies, political ability focuses on provinces and making money to use on more troops, and charm attracts better officers to control armies, increasing their efficiency. The main screen has a map on the right, showing which faction runs what province and the strength of their troops. The player has one move per turn before the other factions move. On the left, several options are available. The war icon is used to move troops to other areas, recruit more men, attack another area, and even hire a monster! The flag icon represents what the provinces should focus on: farming crops to improve harvest (troops will starve on little food), trading with other nations, and even giving away food to increase loyalty and diplomacy. The diplomacy icon attends to truces with other nations, negotiations, and even sabotage (useful during a war effort). The battle mode occurs if the player invades a neighboring space or an enemy attacks. This becomes a top-down, turn-based battle of wits; the attacker has to capture the defending side's flag or decimate all foes to claim victory. Each infantry type (knight, archer, horseback, mythical creature) has its own attack ranges, powers, and movement tile numbers. The mythical creatures are special units which offer an added paper, scissors, rock element to battles. Hiring an ogre, for example, allows for extra strength in close quarter battles, ideal for taking out close range infantry. Once all units have been moved, it's the enemy's turn. This generally boils down to the biggest troop number claiming the victory, but the occasional dragon unit can tip the balance if used wisely. The unique twist of battle is that each faction has its own wizard, which has its own special powers of fire, lightning, and even poison attacks. These units lose some health when used, so the strategy is to use them as a last resort or to tip a battle. What the game lacks in its overall basic presentation, it makes up for in its longevity and gameplay. Adding fantasy monsters and wizards is a welcome addition to what is already a good strategy title.

Reflections: What is an initially daunting title soon becomes an engrossing *Mega Lo Mania* battle of conquest and domination. Finding the balance of running provinces and stationing troops becomes a full time job, especially considering that you can starve the little blighters by accident! Adding fantasy *D&D* creatures was a stroke of genius, which sets it above generic war titles, adding an extra layer of strategy. The graphics are functional and look like a load of old trousers, but with a game this rewarding, it really doesn't matter. – JE

Genghis Khan

Genre: Strategy
Release Date: Jan. 1990
Developer: Koei
Publisher: Koei
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★

This beast of a turn-based strategy game sees the player build up the Mongol Empire and eventually take over the world! The game predominantly takes place via a central menu screen, an overworld map, and a grid battle screen. There are two modes: Mongol Scenario and World Scenario. The former sees you unifying the Empire, and the latter has your swarthy band of miscreants attempt to take over world. The central menu has a plethora of bamboozling options to assign your three turns to before the AI returns the favor. There is no learning curve here, so players will pick what they think are the best options and face the consequences. Training troops (infantry units, archers, horseback riders, etc.), trading, peace treaties with neighbors (sending in spies when they refuse), and going to war are a few options offered. Feeling like a despot? Tax your people more so you can afford better weapons. Feeling generous? Trade for more food so morale increases, boosting loyalty. Be warned – assigning too many troops to your army removes manpower from tasks like running your countries' economy and overall defenses of them. All can be peachy until the computer ruins your day with random acts of violence when they spot a weakness in your stretched resources or another form of evil, like a plague or loyalty dispute. Every action has a reaction so the game is like a juggling act – balance constantly required. The Map is used to observe enemy nations and also shows battle animations of warring opposition. The battle grids are expansive areas of which to move armies alongside foes, engaging the battle of the spreadsheet. Regardless of how big the Mongol army is, it does not necessarily mean the player will win a skirmish, as an opposing army on the brink of defeat won't take it lying down. There is plenty to sink your teeth into here (even multiple endings to play through!). The menus at first are daunting, but a game like this requires patience. There is never a specific spike in difficulty, as a wrong choice could have ramifications hours down the line. Gameplay is king – graphics and sound taking the back seat to a satisfying, if not a trial and error, world conqueror simulation.

Reflections: Koei are the kings of confusion, and *Khan* is an absolute noodle scratcher. I always play the good guy on strategy games, but this time I just thought "What would Temujin (soon to be Genghis) do?" So with that in mind, I focused my effort on the war aspect: training soldiers, spying, and keeping the little blighters in check. I quickly found that not balancing my trade empire and economy stretched my resources to the breaking point. I did not have the funds to keep my war effort afloat, thus bringing about the end of my first try... that and the plague that popped in for a chat. The key is balance, which seems confusing with all the menus on offer, but the trial and error is tremendous fun when you get it just right. – JE

George Foreman's KO Boxing

Genre: Sports, Fighting
Release Date: Dec. 1992
Developer: Beam Software
Publisher: Acclaim Entertainment
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★

Help George become the World Heavyweight Champion by taking him through a gauntlet of opponents in this later released boxing title. The action is viewed from behind George Foreman's back, and left and right punches can be thrown with the A and B buttons. Dodging and punch placement can be handled with the D-pad. It's all very basic, but could have been worked into a fine game with a bit of thought. Instead, a lack of patterns, AI, or any real strategy reduce this game to a mess of a button mashing contest. Bare bones presentation only helps to amplify the simple and joyless gameplay. An included two-player mode is a nice thought, but the game remains the same and the perspective makes it awkward to play. What's here works and it's functional, but that doesn't make it any good. This might have been slightly acceptable at launch in 1985, but by 1992 players expected, and had already received, much better.

Reflections: Holy crap. If you ever thought *Punch-Out!!* was begging to be remade into a game devoid of soul, here's *KO Boxing*. Have fun, you aren't a real person. – IF

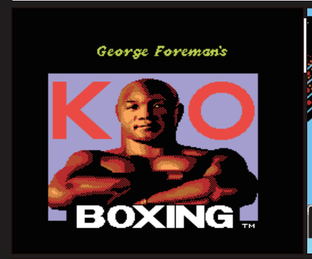
Long before he was a smiling, bald hawker of grills on television, George Foreman was a fearsome heavyweight boxer, a former two-time champion who defeated the legendary Joe Frazier for his first title. In fact, the famous Howard Cosell call of "Down goes Frazier! Down goes Frazier! Down goes Frazier!" was from the fight where Foreman defeated him via TKO for the championship. Foreman would eventually lose the title to an aging Muhammad Ali in the famous "Rumble in the Jungle." He would retire from boxing in 1977 but return 10 years later to the ring. Foreman would semi-miraculously win the heavyweight title again at age 45 against Michael Moorer. He was set to face off against Mike Tyson, but the fight never quite came together, unfortunately. Foreman is also known for having a short-lived sitcom *George*, and for naming all five of his sons "George." Why am I telling you all of this? Perhaps I just want to let you know that this man should be remembered for all his great life achievements, and not for having his name attached to a bad game with carts that almost always have beat-up labels. – PC

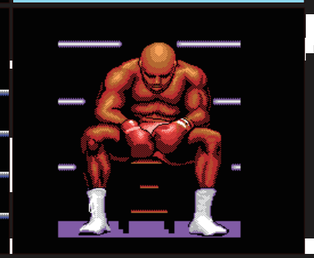
Ghost Lion (Legend of the)

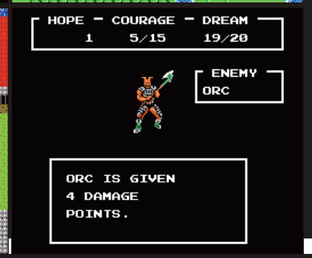
Genre: RPG
Release Date: Oct. 1992
Developer: Kemco
Publisher: Kemco
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

This role-playing game follows Maria, a young girl whose village was attacked by a ghostly apparition known as the White Lion. Hoping to learn more about it, Maria's parents set out on a journey, but never returned. When Maria goes to look for them, she falls into the river and is quickly washed away by the current. She awakens to find herself in a strange new world in which she must locate her missing parents, solve the mystery of the White Lion, and ultimately find her way back home. Gameplay consists of Maria traveling the world in a top-down perspective, speaking with other characters, and completing quests such as delivering a letter or retrieving an important item from a nearby dungeon. Random action encounters take place in a turn-based menu format, with monsters including zombies, orcs, goblins, and werewolves. Rather than gain experience from these battles, Maria must instead collect Fragments of Hope, items that automatically increase her Courage and Dream points (health and magic, respectively). She can also summon a host of spirits to aid her in combat through the use of several magical artifacts. The Spear, for example, calls forth the warrior spirit of Moja, while the Lamp summons the mage Twana. When injured, the player may use bread purchased in town to restore Maria's health, or else visit Bath, the fairy spring where they can also save their progress. The graphics are serviceable and the music is pleasant, if not overly memorable. However, the absence of a standard level-up system makes it somewhat more difficult than others of its kind. A very basic but enjoyable RPG.

Reflections: One of the few RPGs to ever feature a heroine as the main character, *Ghost Lion* is one of those later release NES games that flew under the radar in its day. It doesn't offer much in the way of innovation, and probably borrows a little too much from *Dragon Warrior* (the interface and the battle system in particular) but it still manages to be fun, and in the end, that's what matters most. – JP







Ghostbusters

Genre: Action
Release Date: Oct. 1988
Developer: Activision
Ported by: Bits Laboratory
Publisher: Activision
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★

Four years after the film became a hit in theaters, the game landed with a thud on the NES. This mash-up of an action, resource management, and racing game seems to have the trappings of the movie needed to be a faithful translation at first glance. The basic premise is that you make money by buying ghost-busting equipment, driving to the scene of a ghost sighting, holding said ghosts with your capture beams and sucking them into a trap for later disposal back at headquarters. Unfortunately, execution is far off the mark. The graphics are painful to look at – with many shades of gray making up the vast majority of the color palette. Required driving segments to ghost scenes and back become tedious with constant fender-benders that cost you money in damages and quickly burn fuel that needs to be replenished. Ghostbusting itself can be an exercise in frustration, as the ghosts move randomly about the screen and may never even drop to a level where your beams have a chance to touch them. But the absolute worst is the final level – the Zuul building. You must slowly climb up many flights of stairs by button-mashing as ghosts randomly speed around you. Three touches and it's game over. Even with items from the shop that supposedly make this stage easier, it's nigh impossible to advance. This is an extra kick in the pants, since the final stage (where you shoot Gozer with proton beams in a top-down shooter mode) is arguably the most fun in the game. The worst part is that there are the makings of a good game in here somewhere. The famous theme song is faithfully reproduced (and plays in a neverending loop), the Ecto-1 makes an appearance (as you careen almost uncontrollably into motorists on the highway), and you even have to climb up 23 flights of stairs in the Zuul building (by mashing the A button ad nauseam). However, the game is quickly revealed to be a hot mess. Highly unrecommended.

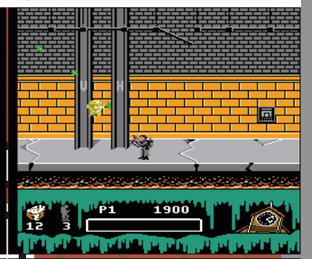
Reflections: *Ghostbusters* on the NES is actually based on a version first made in 1984 for the Atari 800 and Commodore 64 by David Crane, the famous designer of games like *Pitfall!* Eventually, it came to the NES via Japanese developer Bits Laboratory and was sold in America, the game's original homeland. You can appreciate Crane's work much more by playing any of the other versions of this game (including the Atari 2600 or Sega Master System), which are highly superior. On a personal note, during the Christmas when I first got my NES, I received *Back to the Future*, *Jaws*, *Mickey Mousecapade*, and *Ghostbusters*, which by far was the game I found to have to least redeeming quality of the entire lot. – JD

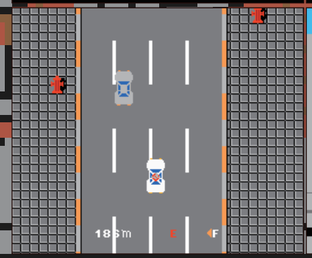
Ghostbusters II

Genre: Action
Release Date: Apr. 1990
Developer: Imagineering
Publisher: Activision
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

The Ghostbusters return to take down the evil Vigo and save NYC In this right-to-left side-scrolling game. Players take control of a Ghostbuster, one at a time, who is equipped with a slime-firing proton pack to destroy flying ghosts and slimers, as well as ghost traps that can be laid down with START to suck in ghosts flying and bouncing above. The controls are good enough - the jumping is decent (although you can only jump forward, not straight up), movement is smooth, and the slime cannon can be aimed up to fire at several different angles. However, the difficulty is extremely high, with ghosts and enemies coming at you in quick bouncing patterns, with the player's jump sometimes being insufficient to avoid the unkillable enemies. Some enemies also rush at you with such speed from the edge of the screen that you'll have no time to react unless you know it's coming. If this wasn't enough, unkillable spiders will slowly walk towards you if the game decides you're taking too long. This wouldn't be so bad if it wasn't for the fact that there is no health bar, but death occurs from a single enemy touch. Shooting 20 Ghostbusters symbols will result in an extra life being awarded, which are very needed to have a chance. The side-scrolling levels are interspersed with horizontal driving stages, where players must blast ghosts while avoiding road obstacles and making jumps over pits in the road. These aren't bad, but are still overly difficult due to the awkward jumping, and again, one-hit deaths. If players can reach that far, they'll be able to control the Statue of Liberty in a very difficult horizontal scrolling shooter scene where you can shoot up from Lady Liberty's torch at ghosts – here at least you are given a small health bar. No pause function was put into the game, so the pain cannot be delayed in any way. Decent graphics and solid music from the film cannot save the fact that this scary sequel should be skipped.

Reflections: While a marked improvement over the original game, this is still such a disappointment. In PAL regions and Japan, an entirely different game was released – *New Ghostbusters II* by Hal Laboratory, a very well done and entertaining overhead action game. Since Activision had exclusive release rights in the United States for Ghostbusters games, we were stuck with this piece of garbage instead. Thanks for nothing, Activision. – PC





Ghosts ’n Goblins

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Nov. 1986
Developer: Capcom
Ported by: Micronics
Publisher: Capcom
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

As Arthur the knight, the player battles it out with zombies, demons, ghosts, and yes, goblins as he tries to rescue the princess. Arthur is armed with a throwing lance but can also obtain other projectile weapons via vases with certain advantages/disadvantages like a throwing knife, torches, ax, and a cross. The action is very frenetic, with multiple enemies who almost never let up and who constantly respawn. The gameplay requires sharp reflexes to survive, since Arthur’s jump is limited to avoid enemies, and he can only handle two enemy hits before death. The first hit shears off Arthur’s armor to reveal his undies and the second turns him into a pile of bones. Tough challenges are presented to the player, such as jumping to/from moving platforms, dealing with flying waves of enemies, and trying to navigate up ladders while enemies above track them, making it difficult to advance. Stage boss battles are extremely challenging, as the patterns of movement can be tough to get a bead on, and the limited amount of hits makes experimentation next to impossible. It’s a good thing that the controls are solid to accommodate the fast action. However, the difficulty is still so extreme in places that it will turn off all but the most experienced players. The final slap in the face is the fact that players have to run through the game twice to get the “true” ending, something that even the most hardened players will find daunting.

Reflections: As one of the earliest third-party NES games, *Ghosts ’n Goblins* still existed in the era where just about every non-Nintendo developed game was an arcade port. As it stood, arcade games were designed to be difficult quarter-suckers, but even still, this title stands as one of the most difficult in the entire NES library. I don’t begrudge a high level of difficulty. However, when it overshadows much of the rest of game (as it does here) and becomes what the game is known for, the challenge becomes much more of a glaring negative attribute than usual against the positive ones. – PC

Ghoul School

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: Mar. 1992
Developer: Imagineering
Publisher: Electro Brain
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

Cool School High has been taken over by monsters, and it’s up to you, teenager Spike O’Hara, to save the day. After all, Samantha PomPom, your ultimate crush, has been kidnapped by the invading baddies, so gel up that mohawk - you have a cheerleader to rescue! This side-scrolling action-adventure takes a little while to appreciate, but once you spend time as the courageous high school senior, you’ll likely come to value this title’s unique charm. You start your quest equipped with a baseball bat and some old sneakers, but various weapon and item upgrades await. Finding the towel, sickle, and various “anti-ghoulie guns” makes fighting freaky foes a bit easier, and helpful footwear, such as the suction cup shoes, enables you to overcome tougher enemies and obstacles. Explore a colorful variety of rooms throughout the sprawling school building, including the library, locker room and cafeteria, but beware: Putrid, Bootoven, and a bevy of phantasms will haunt you relentlessly. Depending on the weapon you wield, monsters can sustain a lot of hits, but fortunately, you can grab apples to keep your own life meter full. Your adventure involves quite a bit of monotonous backtracking, but there’s still some fun to be had. Defeated enemies won’t respawn, ammo is unlimited, and the rooms are all numbered to help you keep track of your location and progress. Though the graphics are average, many of the rooms are lovingly detailed, making the school surroundings feel immersive - you can even hide in the lockers! There’s a decent variety of music to accompany you on your mission, but the “Do Re Mi” tune in the music room is particularly clever. Given a little time, this imperfect yet interesting game might just grow on you. And speaking of growing on you, “Spike O’Hara” is a play on words referring to your pointy mohawk! Get it?

Reflections: We’ve all had that terrible nightmare: We’re in school, and everything seems normal... until we realize that we’re clothed in nothing but our underwear! This game’s hero has undertaken a dangerous and deadly mission, but Spike O’Hara can always take comfort in the fact that he won’t need to face the scariest scenario of all - being nearly nude in front of all his classmates! I know this whole thing feels like a bad dream, Spike. But hey, it could have been a lot worse. – DM

Goal!

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Oct. 1989
Developer: TOSE
Publisher: Jaleco
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

This simple, serviceable soccer game features a nice amount of modes and 16 teams, all with players with individual skill attributes in several categories. There’s a World Cup mode with international teams that allows players to go through the entire tournament, starting from group play to tournament finals with a password save. A single elimination tournament mode is also available for quicker, bracketed competitions between U.S. teams. There’s a standard two-player versus mode or cooperative play, and a fun shootout mini-mode where players can practice their shots. Gameplay takes place from a diagonal overhead perspective. Control is basic and fairly effective with B passing the ball and A taking the shot. A particularly nice feature is the ability to spin the shot after it has been taken by holding B and a direction to give it hook, slice, and topspin. The game is noticeably less refined when playing defense, but players can switch to the defender closest to the ball and slide tackle, or just put pressure on the opposing man and steal the ball. Teammate switching is not always as accurate as it could be, and is particularly frustrating when it costs a player a crucial goal they could have stopped. The graphics are plain but decent, and there’s a nice scrolling effect to the field. Post-goal celebration cutscenes are simple but add a nice little touch. The pitch itself however feels a bit overly wide, which makes judging shots slightly difficult until one gets a better grasp on their general location at any given time. Movement feels a bit choppy, but overall this a fun, if not a little run of the mill, soccer game.

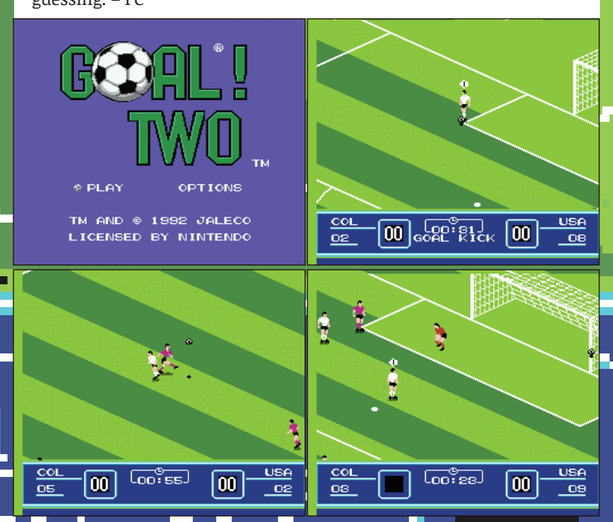
Reflections: Jaleco has the coolest title screens for their early games on the NES. They aren’t flashy but there’s always a nice little animated flourish, whether it’s the soccer player in *Goal!*, the baseball player in *Bases Loaded*, or the cigarette-smoking driver in *City Connection*. – IF

Goal! Two

Eric Cantona Football Challenge: Goal! 2 *(FRA)*
Genre: Sports
Release Date: Nov. 1992
Developer: TOSE
Publisher: Jaleco
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★

In this diagonal top-down soccer game, players select from one of 24 international teams, each full of players with individual offensive/defensive attributes, including the goalie. Game modes include a single exhibition game or the Super Cup, which is similar to the World Cup with six groups of four teams playing three games one another, with the top 16 teams advancing to a single elimination tournament. After selecting the team’s formation, play begins. On the pitch, gameplay takes place close up, with not much of the field in view at one time. When the ball is lobbed high in the air via a pass or goal kick, the view switches to an extreme overhead view with the majority of the field in view until the ball falls closer to the ground, and it then switches back for play to resume. Gameplay is simplistic, with the B button switching players on defense and the A button attempting a tackle/slide tackle when close to an opposing ball carrier. On offense, B lobs the ball up for a pass and the A button works as for passing/shooting, with it also working as a catch-all for heading/volleying/bicycle-kick attempt when the ball’s in the air. On the surface, the gameplay appears functional, with decent graphics and nice player animations. Below the surface, though, the game becomes nigh unplayable. Passing the ball successfully is very difficult due to teammates having difficulty “trapping” the ball, leading to the opposing team stealing it, and the fact that the small area of field in view makes it impossible to know where the other players are to begin with. Defensive play is also frustrating, with successful tackling very difficult to time, and if successful, a foul is called too often anyway. Inexplicably, players selected will move towards the ball automatically without the D-pad, which unnecessarily makes it difficult to get ahead of a play. These factors makes both potent offensive and defensive play painful to execute. It’s a shame, since there’s some nice presentation (goal cutscenes and penalty kicks are impressive), a nice bevy of options (length of game, offsides and fouls on/off), two-player opposing or simultaneous mode, and even changing the control pad’s “true north” to be diagonal, giving players a lot of freedom to have the soccer game experience they wish. Unfortunately, it won’t be a good one.

Reflections: Such a disappointment. There isn’t a really good soccer simulation on the NES, so I had high hopes for this one based upon the features and really nice look/feel of the game. That’s why it’s so strange then when elements like heading the ball and volleying the ball work so well, but a basic element like passing is just a mess. Maybe this game’s release was a covert op by the four major sports organizations in North America to keep soccer down? That’s what I’m guessing. – PC



Godzilla: Monster of Monsters

Genre: Action, Fighting
Release Date: Oct. 1989
Developer: Compile
Publisher: Toho
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⯪

In this side-scrolling action game, the player controls Godzilla, Mothra, and their various powers in an effort to defeat the enemy monsters on each planet. The first thing a player sees upon starting is a hex grid map for movement that shows the basic landscapes as well as the boss monsters. Moving into a hex will start a small action level, and upon completion the player can once again move on the map. These action levels play very differently depending on which monster is chosen by the player. Godzilla is grounded, having the abilities to punch, jump, and use his atomic breath, which is limited by a power meter. Mothra flies, turning the game into more of a side-scrolling shooter. These levels are packed with weird enemies like dragons, UFOs, and phoenixes, as well as gun turrets and machinery. Dodging bullets with Godzilla feels much harder and maneuvering around monsters is more difficult without the ability to fly. Mothra, on the other hand, feels weaker but the ability to take advantage of more screen space makes her the easier character. Entering a space with a boss monster triggers a one-on-one fight. These take place on oddly sparse, black backgrounds, and having a quick finger on the attack buttons is definitely part of the strategy here. Defeating all the major monsters progresses the game to the next planet. The sprites are big, detailed, and convey the material well. The gameplay is basic yet fun, but is lessened by a few cheap hits, clunky control, and repetition. Add half a star for fans of the franchise, but others will likely tire of this fairly quickly, despite its nice presentation.

Reflections: I've always felt there should be a Godzilla game that is more of a video toy. Give me a city, all of the mighty one's powers, and just let me thrash the heck out of stuff with no consequence. Sweet cathartic release! – IF

Godzilla 2: War of the Monsters

Genre: Strategy
Release Date: Feb. 1992
Developer: Unknown
Publisher: Toho
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★

Prep the troops for battle and keep radioactive and alien creatures at bay with turn-based strategy! The 12 scenarios can be played freely, although the greatest experience comes from tackling them sequentially. Within each level, you command the Allied Defense Forces, deploying a limited number of land and air vehicles from bases across the map. Once produced, each unit has limited moves (depending on its type and the terrain) and can either attack an adjacent enemy or take a specialty action, such as the radar car's Search. Combat is a single round of action that involves selecting your unit's ammo and running a slot machine that randomly affects stats, such as defense power, for you and/or your opponent. Match all three symbols, and all your stats increase for a big hit on your foe. If an enemy or ally unit's life points (LP) reach zero, they are destroyed. The monsters regenerate health between turns, while your vehicles can return to base for a similar effect. The core of this game is to use the most effective attacks on the monsters and to position vehicles to prevent the obliteration of important structures, such as bridges. The introduction of new elements not only keeps scenarios fresh but also creates a smooth difficulty curve. Where the game falters is in the monsters' AI, which moves the creatures erratically and only occasionally focuses on destruction. This leads to a game of chase more than a balance of attack and defense. In addition, fans of the Godzilla universe may be disappointed by the lazy treatment of their adored monsters, including Ghidorah, Mothra, and the king himself, Godzilla. Other than their tiny icons on the map, they only appear for a few short seconds during attacks. Ignoring the Godzilla connection, this is an otherwise solid strategy title with good music... and slot machines.

Reflections: What irks me the most about this game is not the genre or presentation but the story. I love Godzilla movies for giant monsters smashing stuff and each other, and that's entirely lost in this game's premise. No one is cheering for the humans when Godzilla is around, so why would we want to play as them? Now, turn the tables and have us controlling a few powerful monsters striving to annihilate all the structures and units of the enemy humans? I'd give that five atomic breaths of approval! – KY

Gold Medal Challenge '92

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Aug. 1992
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Players: 1-8
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★⯪

Capcom tries their hand at the multi sport Olympics-style title in this release that coincided with the 1992 Barcelona Summer Games. Players start by selecting one of 12 countries to represent. There are 17 different events in track & field, swimming, gymnastics, and weight-lifting, so there is a good deal of variety even if some of the games are similar. Getting through events relies heavily on mashing the A and B buttons to gain speed and then pressing the directional pad at appropriate times for throws and jumps. Graphics are solid, although the competitors have a freakish, neanderthal look to them. In the full mode, there is a menu-driven marathon where players change their runner's speed for one segment of the race depending on upcoming topography. You return back to the marathon once every three events, which is a unique break between frantic action. Battery backup keeps the best records on hand, meaning those close victories aren't meaningless. It's a nice attempt at an old format, even though some of the events are harder to learn than perhaps appropriate.

Reflections: I love *Track & Field* style games, and this is definitely in the same mold but with a long and interesting multiplayer focused main mode. The marathon is a simple but compelling mini-game occurring outside of the main game events, and is a really neat touch. These sorts of titles could always benefit from mini tutorials showing new players how to run an event, and it surprises me that in '92 developers still weren't there. These types of games are always a huge nightmare for the newbie amongst veterans due to constantly changing control schemes per event. – IF

Golf

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Oct. 1985
Developer: Nintendo R&D1
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★

The original golf game was one of the first sports titles on the NES. The player chooses either stroke play for one player or stroke or match play for one or two players, and then it's time to hit the fairway. An overhead map of the course appears on the right side of the screen. The player chooses the club type (consulting the manual for the proper one), the relative direction of the shot, and then controls the swing via timing button presses for accuracy and power on a meter – the first time ever utilized in a golf game. Not hitting the ball on the target can result in hooking or slicing the ball. Players can adjust their aim for the wind speed that's displayed on screen. Overall the controls are fine. However, the putting leaves a lot to be desired, as the ball flies off the putter with even a little bit of force used. The single 18-hole course features everything you'd find on a real course, such as sand-traps, trees, and water hazards. The graphics and sounds are both simplistic, and there is no music to be found throughout the game. It's a mundane experience, even for an early NES game.

Reflections: *Golf* may be a launch title, but I'd rather not cut it too much slack. There's just no real depth to be had here with only one course featured, and once you master that one, what else is left? I also do not like the fact that the golf club strengths are not featured in the game, but only in the manual. I know it may feel like a small thing, but it's an annoyance. I do love the middle-aged, paunchy Mario that golfs in the game, though. The plucky plumber may be enjoying his retirement from adventuring a little too much.

This was released in the arcade as part of Nintendo's "Vs." series as *Stroke & Match Golf*. Two different games were released, the standard Men version and Ladies version, with a female character swinging and putting instead of a pudgy Mario. – PC

Golf Grand Slam

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Nov. 1991
Developer: TOSE
Publisher: Atlus
Players: 1-4
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★

The swing mechanic used in this overhead-view golf simulation makes it a unique experience. The power of a shot is determined through a combination of moving a crosshair to the desired landing spot and a club's maximum distance. The accuracy is based on where the player stops a constantly moving dot on a static golf ball in the swing screen. Stopping the dot close to the center often results in a straight shot that goes where the player aimed it. Stopping it to the left or right of center adds hook or slice, while stopping it near the top or bottom adds topspin or backspin, respectively. It's not a difficult mechanic to master, but missed timing can be the difference between a birdie and a bogey. Pre-shot options such as grip and stance selection, along with a few specialty shots, come in handy for more experienced golfers to shape and alter their drives and approaches to each hole. The game offers one 18-hole course, but the hole layouts and pin placements are challenging and will take several rounds to conquer. Tournament mode is the meat of the game for solo players, while up to four people can play a round for bragging rights. Visually, each hole looks good, with an assortment of trees, sand traps, and water hazards surrounding the fairways and greens. There's not a lot to see, and the presentation is minimal, but that doesn't detract from the game's quality. The music consists of a few forgettable background themes, and the sound effects are sparse. All in all, this is largely an average game of golf that may be worth checking out for the interesting swing mechanics.

Reflections: I pumped my fist after my 110-yard approach shot found the cup. On the very next hole, my par putt sailed past the target and off the green. After I finally putted out, the game chided me with a message that read, "Bad putting is the result of improper alignment." Ouch. Seriously, though, that's golf. It's all about the ups and downs that can occur in the span of 18 holes. In that respect, *Golf Grand Slam* is a pretty good simulation of the golf experience. You'll make some good shots, some great shots, and some shots that will leave you shaking your head. FORE! – PS

Golgo 13: Top Secret Episode

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: Sept. 1988
Developer: Vic Tokai
Publisher: Vic Tokai
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

Assassin Golgo 13 is hired to track down the deadly Cassandra-G virus and stop the DREK organization in this action-spy thriller. The majority of gameplay consists of side-scrolling action with Golgo 13 using a pistol or jump-kick to take out generic gunmen and sometimes bazooka soldiers and female agents who shoot and jump kick. More bullets and life points are gained by destroying enemies; no power-ups or items are present, save for the rare cigarette. The side-scrolling stages aren't overly impressive. However, there are several other gameplay types intertwined throughout the game. These include a first-person "pan and zoom" shooting mode where players shoot enemies with a crosshair both on the ground and in the air, underwater scuba diving, side-scrolling helicopter shooter stages, and a very well done (but difficult) 3D maze mode, which requires navigating multi-level labyrinths while shooting enemies and finding items, all while avoiding traps. A mature movie-type plot is woven throughout the game, which is communicated to the player often in conversation cutscenes between Golgo 13 and a second character. While most of the gameplay is decidedly average and the graphics do not totally impress, it's the adult story that is the true star here, featuring twists, betrayal, murder, and even a couple of sex scenes thrown in. It's an intriguing and challenging game that is definitely more than the sum of its parts, and one of the rare NES games that's definitely not for children.

Reflections: I was sold on *Top Secret Episode* ever since it first appeared in the first issue of *Nintendo Power* in its Pak Watch section. Even though I was young, I could still tell that this was a game that was quite different from all the other NES games at the time. I could never get past the second maze in Greece and couldn't totally appreciate the plot, but I knew it was something special.

It was years and years later in college when I discovered that Golgo 13 was a cultural phenomenon in Japan dating back to the late '60s (he's really their deadlier version of James Bond). Then and now, I try to absorb all the media I can concerning this cool and mostly silent bringer of death equipped with a custom M-16 rifle. – PC

The Goonies II

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: Nov. 1987
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Konami
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

In this adventure, Mikey must travel through the Fratellis' hideout and many subterranean caverns to rescue his Goonie pals and a mermaid. How Mikey met a mermaid is deemed unimportant. The game plays in two distinctly different styles. The first is a mostly open-world platformer where the player can pick many paths to explore as they see fit. Exploration is rewarded with power-ups and extra lives. Mikey can fight off most creatures with his various weapons such as a yo-yo, slingshot, bombs, and more. The Fratellis are persistent, however, and can only be incapacitated for short periods of time. Other enemies are standard fare for caves and abandoned shacks, such as spiders, snakes, and bats, although more interesting monsters like dragons and knights reside in the depths below. Traveling between these platforming areas is done via the second game mode. Doors lead to first-person, adventure-style puzzle rooms that allow the player to play a more exploratory game. Players have options to open doors, search for hidden passages by hitting them, find new gear to reach previously inaccessible areas, and more. Sadly, this relies too heavily on hitting everything in sight to reveal necessary secret passages, and not a whole lot more. These spots can really slow down and hamper an otherwise fun game. Worth noting: the game contains a totally rad chip rendition of "Goonies R Good Enough" by Cyndi Lauper that's almost worth the price of admission alone.

Reflections: As a huge *Goonies* fan, I've always enjoyed this game and I jokingly think of it as a canon sequel to the movie. One night a friend and I decided we were going to have the ultimate *Goonies* marathon. After watching the film, I began to play the game with him as my co-pilot, telling me what to do next from an FAQ. Unfortunately, I died three-quarters through and lost a key needed to progress. After a long, futile attempt to find another we shut the game off. – IF

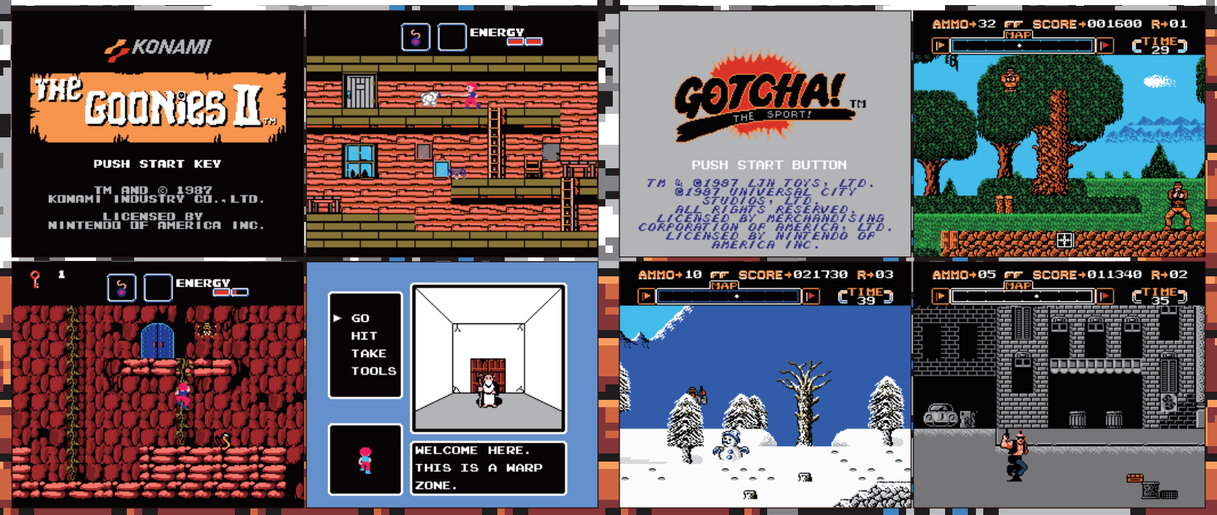
Being a big *Goonies* fan, I always looked at this game with some contempt, starting as a small child. I thought it was insulting how they made a sequel game without ever making one based on the film (of course I was unaware of the Famicom game). I could not comprehend the "knock on a wall, bang with a hammer" puzzles that just slowed the game down to a crawl, and I still don't like them. As bad as the *Back to the Future* game is, at the very least they tried to keep the thing moving along. – PC

Gotcha! The Sport!

Genre: Shooting Gallery
Release Date: Nov. 1987
Developer: Atlus, Sanritsu Denki
Publisher: LJN
Players: 1
Special Features: Zapper (required)
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

This first-person shooter requires the player to use both a standard controller and the Zapper accessory. It's a capture-the-flag paintball match, where the objective is to travel to the opponent team's base, take the flag, and then return back with it to the home base. Using the D-pad, players can move right to travel across the stage, with the location of the player as well as both the player's and opponent's flag visible on the map onscreen. Players will have to shoot opposing players (who will run, climb, lie down, etc.) before being shot themselves. When reaching the opponent's flag, shooting it will place it in their hand, and players will have to then move back left to the starting position to clear the board. However, if shot, the player will lose the flag. If aimed at, a target cursor will float on the bottom on the screen for a few seconds as a warning, giving the player time to either shoot or move left or right away from the shooter. If shot, the player will move back in the stage, and starting again will cost the player valuable time, since the stages are timed, and the game ends if the timer runs out. Players must also avoid getting shot and/or running out of ammo three times (more ammo can be gained by shooting boxes), since that results in a game over as well. The other potential game over is the opposing team capturing your flag and running it back to their base. If the other team has the flag, the player will see their flag moving on the map, but intercepting the runner holding it and shooting them will return it to the home base. There are three different stages, with different environments and accompanying opponents: forest, city, and snow field. The game will cycle between the three stages and repeat with increased difficulty. Graphics are pretty nice, and the gameplay is unique for a Zapper title. However, the limited number of stages and lack of variety doesn't do the game any favors, and the only option available is the starting difficulty. It's fun for a quick paint job, but not much else.

Reflections: Gotcha! was a line of simple paint ball guns you could buy in any toy store in the '80s. I am not sure how this was a great idea, or even legal. My friend had one, but it wasn't exactly a practical toy in a neighborhood, especially if no one else had it too. The guns came with a target, but I'm sure that lasted approximately two minutes until the shooter's aim turned to trees, the side of a house, house pets, and passing cars. – PC

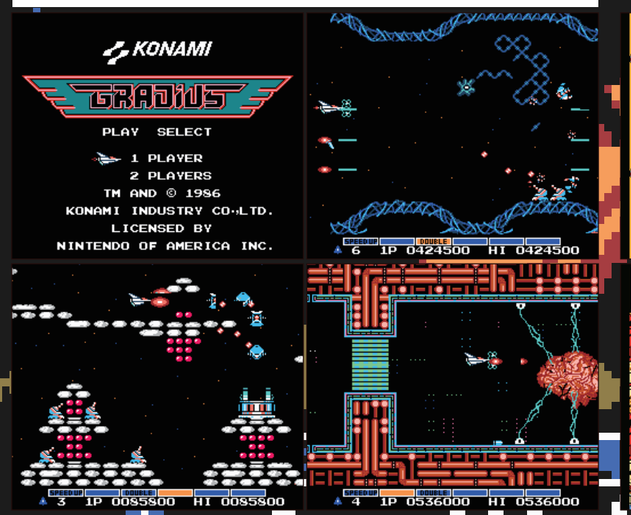


Gradius

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Dec. 1986
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Konami
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

It's one ship against the Bacterion menace in a struggle to save the planet Gradius in this horizontally scrolling shooter. To survive the assault, players have to avoid enemy fire while collecting and strategically using power capsules to upgrade the ship's weapons and maintain its limited force field barrier. Power capsules are obtained from defeated ships, and they fill up the meter at the bottom of the screen. When enough capsules are acquired to light the weapon or upgrade desired, the B button activates it and the meter empties. Powering up the ship is a must, as is staying alive; losing a life resets the weapons and upgrades cache, leaving players in an extremely precarious position against difficult enemies and loads of bullets in later stages. Surviving isn't easy, as collisions with bullets and ships drain the force field, and crashing into the terrain means instant death. Most of the game's seven stages end with a battle against a ship with a core protected by several shields; avoiding the ship's laser fire long enough to destroy the core is required to move on. Colorful, varied, and complemented by outstanding music, the stages have their own unique challenges, from avoiding rocks thrown by active volcanoes to steering around Moai heads and their ring-shaped laser fire. They also offer a decent amount of different enemy ships to take on, and while there is some slowdown here and there, it's not unmanageable. The difficulty is high, but this is one battle that's definitely worth fighting.

Reflections: *UP, UP, DOWN, DOWN, LEFT, RIGHT, LEFT, RIGHT, B, A.* The Konami Code made its debut in this title, and it's been synonymous with video gaming ever since. Honestly, the first game that I used the Code for was *Contra*; my friend Chris showed it to me at his house when we played it together, and I needed every one of those lives to beat the game. When I got around to trying *Gradius* some time after getting my own NES, I could see why the Code was used. This game is TOUGH. It took me decades to finally get past the final stage and see that "Congratulations!" screen. I do believe that this title is bested by *Life Force*, but the latter likely wouldn't exist without the former... and *Gradius* is still a fine shooter, decades after its initial release. – PS



The Great Waldo Search

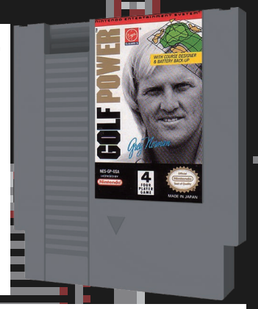
Genre: Puzzle
Release Date: Dec. 1992
Developer: Radiance Software
Publisher: THQ
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★

In this point-and-click game, players are tasked to find Waldo and a magic scroll in four different, timed stages. These consist of semi-animated scenes of many similarly drawn characters, and the player can move around and scroll left/right with a magnifying glass cursor. The four themed stages are Land of the Gargantuas, Kingdom of the Carpet Flyers, Water Monks vs. Fire Druids, and The Enchanted Underground. As long as players can find and click on both the hidden scroll and Waldo in the picture before time runs out, they can move on to another stage. Other clickable items include bonus points, bonus time, and if players click on Woof the dog, a short scrolling horizontal stage where the player can control Woof on a magic carpet and fly into bonus points. A fifth stage contains a multitude of Waldos, and players must click on the Waldo foot without a shoe as well as the scroll. The entire game can be played through in under 10 minutes, and only the more difficult Expert mode adds any real challenge, since the scrolls and Waldo are more obscured than in the Normal mode. A bare bones cash-in, the only real highlight could be the digitized theme song sample at the beginning, taken from the Where's Waldo cartoon (it cannot be skipped over, though). Not recommended, even for Waldo fans.

Reflections: One bad *Where's Waldo* game apparently wasn't enough. I guess because a boring CBS animated show came out (and ended one year earlier), that meant that THQ could publish another shoddy, ill-conceived game based upon a book franchise that I not only never enjoyed, but never understood the appeal of, even as a child. Get out of my NES library and stay out, four-eyes! – PC

Greg Norman's Golf Power

Genre: Sports
Release Date: July 1992
Developer: Gremlin Graphics
Publisher: Virgin Games
Players: 1-4
Special Features: Battery Save, NES Four Score / Satellite compatible, Edit Mode
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★★½



This golf simulation features a bevy of options: 1-4 human or computer players, levels of difficulty, handicap, practice mode, several play modes including stroke or match play, team play modes, and even setting the weather. After choosing one of nine courses, play begins. Graphics look nice, with the player golfing on the left and the map of the current hole on the right. Players choose the club to use (optimal choice pre-selected by the computer). After directing the shot and even choosing the ability to hit on the top/bottom of the ball for backspin/forespin, the player can swing away by using the power meter. Holding the A button will have the player wind up for the power desired, and after releasing, the player will have to time another A button press to hook, slice, or hit the ball straight. When the ball reaches the green, the putting mode will be activated, with arrows denoting the various slope directions. The club swinging feels and operates very nicely, due to a great feeling of control in hitting around and over the sand traps, water hazards, trees, and rough, all in an effort to try and stay on the green. The golfing experience here is accurate and top-notch, with the variety of options enough to satisfy hardcore golf nuts. Players can even design an 18-hole custom golf course, and save it to play later. Only the lack of a tournament and career modes keeps this from being a perfect golf title, and maybe the fact that all the golfers on the course look a little bit like Greg Norman.

Reflections: I'm not a big golf fan, and I'd rather play pick-up sticks than watch it on television, but I've always enjoyed playing golf games. The one I remember the most was EA's *PGA Tour Golf*, which I played on the family's IBM 486 via a bootleg 3.5-inch DOS disk. I still remember the simple bleeps and bloops from the PC speaker, long before we had installed the Sound Blaster 16 sound card. There's something both strategic and calming that I enjoy about golf games. However, in real life I've never even had the urge to do pitch-and-putt, let alone play on a real golf course. Now mini-golf, that's the sport of kings! Or a good way to kill an hour on a date. – PC

Gremlins 2: The New Batch

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Oct. 1990
Developer: Sunsoft
Publisher: Sunsoft
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★½

Players take control of Gizmo the friendly Gremlin in this overhead platformer. Gizmo is armed with projectile weapons to attack evil Gremlins, starting with tomatoes that can be thrown and then changing every few stages to others, such as paper clips and a matchstick-firing bow. Defeated enemies will drop crystals that can be collected. Once per stage, players can find and enter a shop to purchase one of several items, including powering up for the weapon, an extra life, health replenishment/increase, balloon for traveling over pits, etc. Controls are smooth, responsive, and Gizmo moves quickly, resulting in a fast-paced and fun action experience. The platforming element, however, is a little suspect. Spiked grounds, moving conveyor belts, and pitfalls litter the levels, providing most of the challenge. Unfortunately, the quick jumping combined with the somewhat imprecise nature of judging the distance of jumps will result in many falls. Fortunately, these falls do not result in instant death but rather only a health decrease, keeping the challenge at least a little fair. The presentation on this title is very fine, with above average graphics, sound/music, impressive boss sprites, and a few nice cutscenes to move the story along. Overall, Gizmo would approve!

Reflections: *Gremlins 2* wasn't a film I really ever cared about. The original I never really saw as a kid, and the sequel coming out a full six years after the original was strange, even at the time. That said, this game did decent sales, and the great Sunsoft pedigree and polish that we saw in titles such as *Batman* and *Blaster Master* was also on display here. – PC

The Guardian Legend

Genre: Shooter, Action
Release Date: Apr. 1989
Developer: Compile
Publisher: Brøderbund Software
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★⯪

This unique multi-genre game features shooter and action sequences, requiring both cerebral planning and animal adrenaline. The bio-technological planet Naju is going to collide with Earth and you, a (female?) transformer robot, must destroy it before they crash by accessing 10 self-destruct devices. You'll battle evil alien creatures on Naju through the air, water, and on the ground. You start playing as a shooter space-jet in overhead perspective, but after the first boss it changes to a top-down action game. You'll spend the game switching between these modes as you search Naju. The game's nonlinear, so you freely decide what to do and when. The Guardian has two forms: a humanoid in the overheard action-adventure "labyrinths" and a spaceship in the vertical shooter "dungeons." The labyrinths are easier but require thought to navigate, with adventure elements like finding keys for pathways and clues left by the aliens' Najuvian victims. You can move straight and diagonally, shooting and avoiding enemies like slimes, plants, and mini-bosses. A map screen shows your location's X-Y coordinates, and you can shoot blocks to reveal paths and items. Exploration is rewarded with power-ups that give you ammunition, life, and RPG-like level-ups. Collecting weapons, like multi-bullets, grenades, shields, etc., and "chips" to power them is essential, since the shooter sequences are blazingly fast and difficult. You enter shooter dungeons by opening "corridors" leading to them. It's the heart of the game, with the toughest enemies and bosses. Learning patterns is important, but some bosses return with newer, harder methods. Completing dungeons opens new paths through Naju by giving you a key or passage to another area, and you're usually returned to the labyrinth. The music and graphics here are superb, featuring a variety of songs and unique monsters. You get infinite continues and a password, but it's long and only available from particular cute blue creatures (who sometimes give weapons). That's inconvenient for a lengthy game, but it's worth experiencing this unique title regardless of if you finish it.

Reflections: This is one of many excellent games that I did not know about while growing up, partly because it came out before I got a gaming magazine (and the ability to read one). The same developers created hits such as *Gun-Nac* and *Puyo Puyo* (the cute slime creature that allows you to save might be a reference to that). I can't think of a good reason why this game isn't more famous than it was back then, or is now. Maybe it wasn't marketed as much as it should've been, or maybe the difficulty was too off-putting. Who owns the rights to *The Guardian Legend*, and where is she now? She deserves a new game less because of nostalgia than because another game with a girl who can turn into a spaceship would be awesome indeed. – KN

Guerrilla War

Genre: Run and Gun Shooter
Release Date: June 1989
Developer: SNK
Publisher: SNK
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★★

In this overhead run and gun shooter, players are tasked to liberate an island from a dictator. Armed with unlimited machine gun ammo and grenades, players can move in all eight directions to avoid and take out a multitude of enemy soldiers, small tanks, and more. The gameplay is fast and exciting, as there are usually several enemies who will attack at once in a fixed position (sometimes in trenches, behind barriers, etc.) or while advancing. There are several soldier types; some will move around and fire at you, some crouch and throw grenades, some lie prone (so only a grenade can hit them), some use bazookas, and some even retreat. Even if a dozen enemies are on the screen at once, there is no slowdown that occurs, which keeps the frenzied pace going. It can be a slog, for sure, but the interesting layouts of obstacles on the path (some of which can be destroyed), buildings, and variety of stage environments keep it interesting, as players will battle in the jungle, farm, city, coal mine, and more. Also, most levels will switch it up and have the player move a little laterally as well as vertically in the stage. Players can rescue hostages for points, but shooting them by accident will result in a penalty. Enemies like huge tanks and helicopters will show up from time to time and take a run at the player, which are a treat to fight. Stage bosses are interesting and range from larger vehicles to enemy soldier waves. Power-ups are very impressive, which include a missile launcher, spread machine gun, increasing explosion size of grenades, an awesome flamethrower, and missiles that explode with spread bullets. These are a blast to use, and are equipped when the player jumps in one of several available tanks throughout the game. When commanding one, the player is protected from bullets and can run over soldiers. However, if the tank is hit with a missile or grenade, they'll have a limited amount of time to exit before it explodes. Controls are spot on, allowing the player to move deftly while avoiding the one-hit deaths. If this package wasn't stuffed enough already, there's a quality soundtrack, the ability to start the game at later stages, a stellar co-op mode, a cool mine cart bonus round, and unlimited continues. A thrilling pinnacle of the genre.

Reflections: SNK fulfilled the promise here that they made with *Ikari Warriors*, which left a lot to be desired (especially on the NES). I'm not sure what else you could ask for from a run and gun shooter. There are even humorous elements in the game that I didn't spoil in the review! There's a bit of a pall over this game's background. In Japan, the title was *Guevara*, and indeed, the "heroes" were Che Guevara and Fidel Castro, who overthrew the Batista Cuban government in the 1950s. While their look remained on the NES version, all references to them and the "revolution" were omitted. – PC

Gumshoe

Genre: Shooting Gallery
Release Date: Aug. 1986
Developer: Nintendo R&D1
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1
Special Features: Zapper (required)
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★

An interesting spin on the light gun genre has players protecting a central character by shooting harmful obstacles in his path. Shooting Mr. Stevenson, the heroic detective, will cause him to jump over pits and over obstacles. The player can further help by sniping maniacally grinning birds, flying booze bottles, and angry armadillos that will try and hurt the detective and cause single-hit death. A city of fun and adventure! Shots will be used frequently, but maneuvering Mr. Stevenson into balloons will give the player more shots. Potions can also be obtained (by shooting and having Mr. Stevenson run into them) to add a layer of protection until an enemy runs into our gumshoe. Beyond surviving, the goal is to collect diamonds in each stage for mafia boss King Dom who has kidnapped your daughter. This can be incredibly taxing, as they require a good amount of precision and timing with your shots to obtain. The hit detection is not fantastic, and in a game this frantic, it turns a great idea into something much more frustrating. This is a real shame because the levels are colorful and vibrant, and they look like they would be a blast to explore if they were given a more functional control scheme. A rare misstep by Nintendo.

Reflections: I have always wanted a code or a hack that would let me freely take control of Mr. Stevenson and walk around the levels. They are incredibly fun to look at and make great use of color with fantastic sprites. This is a title with which I constantly play the "What If?" game. – IF

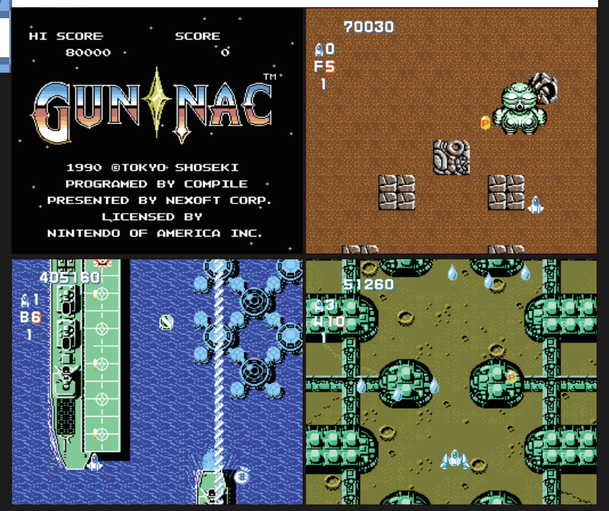
Wild Bill Hickock himself couldn't get past the second level of this game. With rapid fire. Using a shotgun. – PC

Gun-Nac

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Sept. 1991
Developer: Compile
Publisher: ASCII
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Rare
★★★★★

A peaceful federation of seven planets has been turned upside down as a secret invader has caused all of the wildlife and nature to turn against humanity. Players must take control of ace pilot and fighter craft Gun-Nac to save the day in this off-kilter vertical shooter. Gun-Nac has five different primary weapons that players can pick up in numbered bubbles. These range from standard vulcan cannon upgrades to homing waves to a unique flamethrower-type weapon. Picking up subsequent same-numbered bubbles will grant players an evolved version of that weapon, while tiny P icons will do the same (up to eight levels). Picking up a different-numbered weapon will switch to that one while also upgrading the power by one level. Four bomb types are in squares and range from rainfall to ricocheting lightning; they can be powered up once but will consume twice the the ammunition. The weapon and bomb types often pair well with each other. For instance, homing waves can often leave open spaces on the screen that rainfall bombs can cover with their screen-filling drops. The ship can also find a wing power-up that will provide armor and increase firepower. Many items and money can be found in Randar (Compile's cute little blob mascot), who appears throughout the game. The gameplay is smooth and fast if a little bit on the easy side. For shooter veterans it is suggested that one beefs up the difficulty. The waves and patterns in this game are extremely well done, and shooter fans will find lots to enjoy. There is lots of quirkiness in stage and enemy design – robot rabbits and carrots, a forest with logs and angry woodland forest spirits, Lucky Cats and rolls of money, and more. Unfortunately, the game ditches this in the later stages and becomes standard shooter fare, and while that is a bit of a bummer, it doesn't detract from the excellent gameplay. A shop in between stages allows you to replenish weapons and bombs and buy the frequency of which bombs you'll see in a stage. Also notable is the highly configurable options menu cutely named "config.sys." This is easily one of the best-crafted shooters on the NES. Despite not quite following through on its initial weird premise and a little screen flicker, it rarely slows down or brings anything but the best.

Reflections: I remember playing this at a friend's house and seeing it on *Nick Arcade* and always wanting it, but my parents were reluctant to buy shooters. Despite my mom always plunking quarters into games like *Phoenix*, *Galaga*, and their ilk at the laundromat, I don't think they saw the bang for thebuck they would get out of *The Legend of Zelda* or a good platformer. I remember this being one of the first games I hunted down in '98 or '99 and one of the last I let go when clearing out my NES collection. – IF



Gun.Smoke

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Feb. 1988
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

In this vertically scrolling shooter set in the Old West, the player takes control of a gunfighter trying to take back the town of Hicksville from the evil Wingate family. Each stage consists of the gunman shooting at villainous cowboys, Indians, and other foes, on his way to facing the stage boss. The control scheme is unique to this shooter in that B shoots diagonally to the left, A shoots diagonally to the right, and pressing both buttons at the same time shoots straight ahead. This allows the player to move/evade in one direction while shooting in another, and allows the game to challenge the player by throwing many enemies at them from all directions while providing the ability to appropriately fight them off. In the levels, the player can earn power-ups by shooting barrels to increase their gunfighter's speed and the range of their bullets. Points are earned and can be cashed in via townsfolk to purchase weapon upgrades such as a shotgun or a magnum, ammo, a horse (which acts as armor as well as a speed-up item), and the "Wanted!" poster for each stage's boss, which allows the player to face them or else the level will loop. Action is fast-paced and challenging, and is complemented by a very good soundtrack, making for one of the finest and most unique NES shooters.

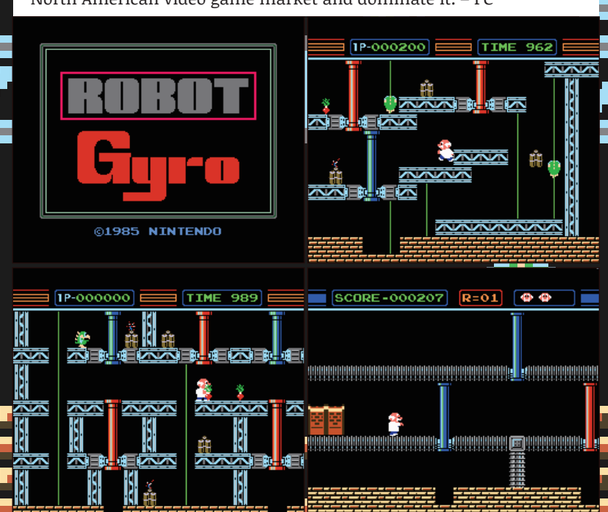
Reflections: Should I be offended by the name "Hicksville"? A western-themed shooter may not seem like a unique title, but when you realize at the time that 99 percent of shooters were plane or spaceship based, it's a fresh change of pace. I'm not sure why I never owned a shooter on the NES when I was a kid, but if I did have a choice, it would have likely been *Gun.Smoke*. – PC

Gyromite

Genre: Puzzle, Action
Release Date: Oct. 1985
Developer: Nintendo R&D1
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-2
Special Features: R.O.B. compatible
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★

Professor Hector must collect all the dynamite in rooms in this puzzle game meant to show off the Robotic Operating Buddy (R.O.B.) peripheral. Players have a set time limit to collect/defuse lit dynamite sticks in a room. Players can walk, fall off ledges, and climb up/down ropes to get around. Preventing players from passing are blue and red columns, which can be moved down and held in that position either by pressing start and sending the command to R.O.B. (who will slowly maneuver spinning gyros and drop them to activate buttons on the second controller), or by using A and B on the second controller directly. Moving the columns will allow Hector to pass, but players may accidentally crush themselves if not careful. Players will contend with green creatures named Smicks. Players may attempt to crush them with the columns, or pick up and drop turnips to distract them while they feast. There are 40 different levels to be played, but the experience for each is similar, as the player must figure out how to get to all the dynamite without trapping themselves. It's a shallow experience meant to showcase R.O.B., but there's a little charm here in visuals, sounds, and level theme. A second mode has the player controlling R.O.B. to help a sleep-walking Hector through a level, a semi-interesting diversion if you'd like to extend your play time with your robotic pal.

Reflections: Originally packed alongside *Duck Hunt* in the Nintendo Entertainment System, *Gyromite* went largely unplayed, primarily due to the fact that R.O.B. was difficult to position and set up to play (besides being very slow to move). If players did try, they could use a second controller themselves, or have a friend help out. It's ironic that R.O.B. ended up in closets collecting dust, since he was so integral in getting the NES sold in North America and kick-starting the home console video game market again. By including both R.O.B. and the Zapper, Nintendo successfully convinced retailers in the NYC test market region that this was more a toy than a video game system, since retailers wanted little to do with video games after the crash of 1983-84. This was a fib, but it got their foot in the door, allowing them to set up display stations and demonstrate the NES to potential customers and passersby in department stores, toy stores, and malls. Somehow it worked and sold enough units so that by the Spring of 1986, retailers were asking for the NES and it started to roll out nationwide. R.O.B. was used to advertise the NES for the next couple of years and featured prominently in both print ads and television commercials. Behind the scenes, though, Nintendo knew R.O.B. was a sacrificial lamb, with only two games that were ever produced for the unsuccessful peripheral in Japan and none planned for the future. But the gambit worked, as R.O.B. helped get Nintendo a foothold in the North American video game market and dominate it. – PC



Gyruss

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Feb. 1989
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Ultra Games
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

This enhanced port of Konami's arcade shooter allows players to rotate their ship 360 degrees in a circle, as enemy waves invade from the center and sides of the screen. Players face down a tube-like section of space while maneuvering around the edges to shoot down enemies as they approach. By completing each stage, players progress closer and closer to new planets and their bosses. These bosses, with new music, a phaser attack, and more levels, are all additions that make this a much meatier and satisfying game than its arcade counterpart. The ship has an upgradeable main gun as well as special shots that do much more damage to enemies. This is a fairly fun, decent title that could have been a much more solid game, except that the perspective is extremely difficult to judge. Sometimes an enemy right on top of the player's ship leaves it unharmed, while other times it results in a lost life. The poor scaling makes detecting distance and positions of enemy ships more difficult than it should be in later, more hectic levels. All of the additional features not found in the original arcade game are nice, but in the end it still doesn't create a game that's anything above average.

Reflections: This game is most easily comparable to a fleshed-out *Tempest*, but what puts that game head and shoulders above *Gyruss* is really the simple use of vector lines to give players a sense of where enemies are in relation to their ship. Without those, one is left to make vague judgements, and in the shooter genre those are too often not enough to survive. – IF

Ultra Games was an alternate game publishing label created by Konami to get around Nintendo's rule that said publishers could only release a maximum of five games on the NES per year. The rule was seemingly created as safety net against publishers spitting out a plethora of garbage games and flooding the market – a response to the video game crash of 1983. After the release of the SNES, Nintendo softened on their stance, and Ultra Games soon disappeared. – PC

Harlem Globetrotters

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Mar. 1991
Developer: Softie
Publisher: GameTek
Players: 1-4 (simultaneous)
Special Features: NES Four Score / Satellite compatible
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★

This attempt at a side-scrolling, five-on-five basketball game has few positives and many negatives. The positives have to do with the options, as there are two "difficulty" settings and the ability to customize how long each quarter is. Players can also elect to be either the Globetrotters or the normally inept Washington Generals. The only major difference between the two teams is that the Globetrotters have some flashier dunks. Otherwise, the Generals can beat the Globetrotters in any given game - which doesn't really make sense. The gameplay is terrible. Passing to a teammate, especially against a CPU-controlled opponent, has a strong chance of getting intercepted thanks to tight defense. There isn't any kind of indicator to see where the pass is heading, other than hoping that it goes in the direction pressed on the D-pad. Speaking of tight defense, the CPU plays close man-to-man all the time, so creating space for shooting is difficult. Even with open shots, there isn't any feedback to understand why shots are successful or not. Steals are too easy, and changes of possession on the court lead to momentary pauses in the action on the screen. It's possible to get used to the poor controls, but there's no real replay value here to keep players coming back, aside from maybe getting up to four people involved. There's no season play or stat tracking. The graphics are mediocre, highlighted by decently sized players and some neat dunk animations. The sound is punctuated by a few short music clips and weak effects. These aren't bad in any way, but they don't really add much, either. All told, this game is below average at best, dragged down by poor controls and an inconsistent challenge.

Reflections: I don't know what I should have expected, but it certainly wasn't this subpar effort. A game based on the Harlem Globetrotters should have relaxed rules, a lot of offense, and some sweet dunks - but this title only gets one of those things right. It tries to be a simulation more than an arcade-style game, which really doesn't make sense if you've ever watched the Globetrotters play. Perhaps the biggest sin that this game commits is that it's just not any fun. The Globetrotters are all about fun on the court, but there's none of it to be found here. And no Globetrotters theme of "Sweet Georgia Brown"? That's a technical foul. – PS

Hatris

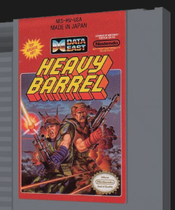
Genre: Puzzle
Release Date: Apr. 1992
Developer: Bullet-Proof Software
Publisher: Bullet-Proof Software
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★

In this puzzle game, players have to stack six different hats, two at a time, onto six different and strange-looking mannequin heads. Players begin by choosing the starting difficulty level as well as the starting pile of hats. As the hats fall down, you can swap which side they are on to try and stack the similar hats together. Once five identical hats are stacked on the same column (head), they will disappear to allow for more room. The game ends once one of the hat columns is stacked too high to the top. You can earn "helper" power-ups to assist you in removing hats or switching hat columns by stacking and eliminating five sets of the same type of hat, and can store up to eight of each to use at any time. With even being able to see the next pair of hats coming up, there is little here in terms of puzzle strategy, as earning and using the helper power-ups seems to be the easiest and clearest way to stay out of trouble. As it stands, this is a shallow game offering little to nothing in terms of strategy or puzzle fun.

Reflections: The creep-factor in this game is off the charts. So you're working in a hat factory with nothing but bearded men, and the mannequin heads you use are Charlie Chaplin, Frankenstein, Dracula, etc. – nothing blank like a normal mannequin. It's also weird that Bullet Proof opted for a *Tetris* cash-in in terms of what the similar title, even when the gameplay has nothing to do with that game except for the fact that objects drop. That would be like me developing a game where kittens fire guns at mice and calling it *Cattra*.– PC

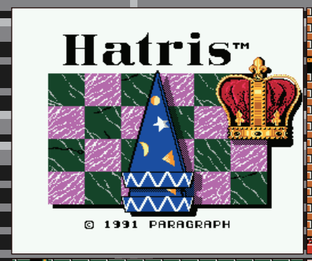
Heavy Barrel

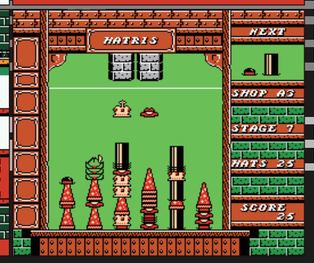
Genre: Run and Gun Shooter
Release Date: Mar. 1990
Developer: Data East
Ported by: Sakata SAS
Publisher: Data East
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★



Players must take down a terrorist organization that has taken control of a nuclear missile site in this overhead run and gun shooter. Initially armed with a machine gun and simple grenades, players are faced with enemy foot soldiers who will fire upon the player and throw grenades. A single shot will kill the player, but smooth controls will allow the player to move, dodge, and aim/fire in eight directions. Some red enemies will appear that, if shot, will drop keys. These keys can be used to open crates which contain power-ups: a spread-fire gun, a flamethrower, and upgrades to the secondary weapon (stronger grenade or force field). There are also several pieces of the "Heavy Barrel" weapon, that when all collected, will enable the player to utilize the super gun weapon for a limited amount of time. While the action is satisfying, the enemy types are limited and not too original. Even the enemy bosses that are encountered aren't too exciting in design either. Graphics and sounds are adequate, but nothing to write home about. While a solid game, it lacks in some finishing touches and niceties that could have made it a bit better.

Reflections: There are some games that seem to be "just good enough" to be fun, but not memorable. *Heavy Barrel* seems to fit that category. There are good ideas and it's competently made, but there's just not enough "hutzpah" and creativity to put this title over the top. Then again, the same could be said for dozens of other games in the NES library. – PC





Heavy Shreddin'

Snowboard Challenge *(PAL)*
Genre: Sports
Release Date: June 1990
Developer: Imagineering
Publisher: Parker Brothers
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

Conquer the mountains by carving a path through various obstacles and challenges in this snowboarding game! Players make their way through six trails, and each has three challenges to beat before reaching the bottom. Downhill events are the easiest, as the objective is simply to reach the goal before time runs out. It sounds simple, but players have to avoid trees, water, and other things along the way - one crash, and it's back to the beginning. Slalom involves boarding through sets of flags while avoiding many kinds of objects seen in Downhill. Memorization is crucial to finishing these events, and just like Downhill, one crash or missed set of flags sends players back to the start. The Half-Pipe event is all about stunts, which are pulled off with the jump button and a tilt of the D-pad. Each of these events has a certain number of stunts that must be successfully completed before moving on. The Moguls event requires a mix of careful steering and stunts to complete. Finally, the Backwoods event is all about avoiding the big crash. Players jump over tractor-trailers, avoid wildlife, and duck under objects while gliding to the finish. The controls take some getting used to, especially turning. While the screen occasionally flashes instructions on what players should do next, it feels a bit late. Visually, the game looks pretty much the same for most courses, save for the additions of certain objects depending on the event. There's a lot of white snow to be seen behind a relatively nondescript but well-animated snowboarder. The soundtrack is pretty good, and making it to the Backwoods events plays the best music in the game. With practice, this one can be fun - but it doesn't come easy.

Reflections: There are very few certainties in life, but one is that you will never see me on a snowboard. Walking is already a challenge, let alone balancing and gliding down a hill on a piece of wood. My results when playing *Heavy Shreddin'* the first few times were basically what I'd expect if I tried snowboarding in reality: I crashed and fell dozens of times, hitting trees, landing in water, and falling after jumps. At least playing this game didn't leave me battered, bruised, soaking wet, and requiring an emergency room visit. That's always a plus. – PS

High Speed

Genre: Pinball
Release Date: July 1991
Developer: Rare
Publisher: Tradewest
Players: 1-4
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

In this adaptation of the classic pinball machine, players must use their flippers to shoot the ball into targets and various lanes, increasing the speed of their getaway car to avoid getting caught by the police. The field setup is the same as the actual pinball machine, but the video game version isn't nearly as fun. The first issue is the muddled graphics, which make it difficult to clearly see the various lanes, and the fact that the ball is a similar color as much of the playfield doesn't make it easy to follow the action. The other strange decision made is that the developers added "enemies" that appear in the playfield and can affect the ball in negative ways if contact is made, like slowing it down or even dragging it into the ball drain. This change transforms the game into something it shouldn't be, as it ceases to be a decent translation of a good pinball game, instead making it a frustrating and unfun one. While there are some nice voice samples, and you can even "bump" the table via B, this doesn't come close to emulating the actual pinball experience.

Reflections: Acid that dissolves your ball on the playfield? A helicopter which can carry it away? It's difficult enough to play this game trying to distinguish the ball from the playfield, but adding obstacles makes it an insane experience, and adding ways to battle these obstacles while playing frickin' pinball is an insult. Come on, Rare. Seriously? Talk about trying to outthink the room. – PC

Hogan's Alley

Genre: Shooting Gallery
Release Date: Oct. 1985
Developer: Nintendo R&D1
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1
Special Features: Zapper (required)
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

This shooting range game consists of three modes. Mode A has three cardboard cut-outs representing people that are rolled out and then turned to face the player at the same time. The player must shoot the gangsters on screen in the allotted time while avoiding the representations of innocent people. It's a test of aim, reflexes, and recognition in deciphering the intended targets quickly. If the player fails to shoot all the gangsters on screen or hits an innocent person, the player will record a miss. When more than 10 missed are recorded, the game will end. As the game progresses, it will increase in difficulty by adding more gangsters and decreasing the allotted time per round. Game mode B is a little fresher in that the targets are rolled out and revealed in a simulated town, so the player has to adjust aim both horizontally and vertically. Game mode C has the player shoot falling cans to try and keep them in the air to land on platforms for points. While not the deepest experience, this is a fine Zapper diversion, which shows off some nice early NES sprites and the early, fun tone of the system.

Reflections: *Hogan's Alley* seemed to be somewhat the NES Zapper title of choice for the kids I knew. While of course everyone owned *Duck Hunt*, this was usually the secondary light gun game to own, instead of the early and somewhat similar *Wild Gunman*. *Duck Hunt* and *Hogan's Alley* were both in arcades previously as part of the VS. series of machines that featured very nice (and heavy) light gun revolvers that were chained to the machine. – PC

Hollywood Squares

Genre: Game Show, Trivia
Release Date: Sept. 1989
Developer: Rare
Publisher: GameTek
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★⋆

Based upon the television game show, the object of the game is to make tic-tac-toe on a square board filled with celebrities, by successfully agreeing or disagreeing with answers to their questions. After entering your name and selecting a character, the game begins against a single opponent. Players select one of nine celebrity squares on a three-by-three stack of cubes to choose from, and then that celebrity will be asked a question. After a false, humorous answer, a real answer will be revealed, and the player has to then decide to agree if it is true or not. If they select correctly, they get an "X" on that spot, but if they're wrong it's an "O." Play then proceeds to the second player, going back and forth until someone completes tic-tac-toe, with the caveat being that a wrong answer by an opponent cannot complete one to end the round. Completing tic-tac-toe earns $500 for rounds one and two, and $1,000 for round three. If no tic-tac-toe is possible, players earn $100 for each square won in rounds one and two, and $200 for round three. The winning player then enters the bonus round and gets the chance to select one of five keys and match it with the correct car to win it. If they are unsuccessful, they can use the same character/name to play another game. It's not exactly a deep game, but it matches the presentation, style, and humor of the game show it's based on very well, and many of the false answers are actually clever and funny. There's also a good amount of questions (over 400) and several incorrect answers for each to keep things somewhat fresh for multiple playthroughs. Fans of the game show should enjoy.

Reflections: I used to be a big fan of the game show as a kid. The simplicity of the show and the humor was fun, the host John Davidson was affable, and who didn't love Jim J. Bullock? Okay, put your hands down. – PC

Home Alone

Genre: Action
Release Date: Oct. 1991
Developer: Bethesda Softworks
Publisher: THQ
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★⋆

Kevin must avoid the Wet Bandits until the police arrive in this contained-environment action title. Gameplay takes place in a multi-level house (with attached basement and treehouse), where players must avoid the two criminals searching and chasing them for 20 consecutive minutes, as getting caught once ends the game. Since the bandits can track Kevin and are slightly quicker, players can place traps to temporarily incapacitate the criminals. These traps are randomly located throughout the house. Players may pick up and hold up to three of these square icons, which may be dropped/activated anywhere in or outside the house. If a criminal runs into one, they'll fall down for anywhere from a couple to several seconds, depending on the type of trap used (after use, traps may be picked up again). If cornered or without a trap, players may also press UP to hide in certain areas (for example: in the Christmas tree), for a limited amount of time until discovered and caught. The pace here is frantic, as players must balance movement and planning where to go next, placing traps, and hiding out, all while hopefully avoiding the bandits. Issues start to quickly arise though due to the shoddy controls, especially when trying to travel up/down diagonal staircases, as the player has to be in a precise spot to make it work. When seconds count (especially when being chased), this is an inexcusable detriment. Also, the bare-bones setting and activation of the traps is boring to behold, with no animation or explanation of what the trap is doing to disable the bandits. The traps also seem to not work often off screen. This is strange, since they can be viewed on the pause map screen and it would seem you could strategically place them, but it's not uncommon for a bandit to come charging at you from an off-screen location where he somehow avoided one. These perplexing issues wreck what is a solid chase-game concept on paper, and the fact that the game only lasts up to 20 minutes with no other levels or options makes this a title that should be left all alone.

Reflections: *Home Alone* was an absolute phenomenon of a film when it was released, breaking several box office records and catapulting Macaulay Culkin into superstardom. I personally was never a huge fan of the film as a child (I thought Kevin was a bit of a snot-nose), even though I appreciate it for what it was. Unfortunately, one of the biggest films of all time was (surprise!) given a pretty bad translation onto the NES. The mediocre graphics, the controls that can fail you, and the cheap method of setting/activating traps – all a shame. – PC

Home Alone 2: Lost in New York

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Oct. 1992
Developer: Imagineering
Publisher: THQ
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★

Help Kevin McCallister escape the wrath of the Wet Bandits in this platformer based on the hit movie sequel. Players are able to run, jump, knee slide, and collect and use simple traps such as beads for enemies to slip on as they make their way through various generic city locales. The stiffness and unresponsive nature of the controls is immediately noticeable upon playing. It's one of the many major hurdles that will prevent any real enjoyment being had from the game. Players will start out in the hotel from the movie and plod through a needlessly long stage full of identical-looking hallways and elevators in search of a way to get outside. The game's problems become apparent here. The graphics are bland and extremely repetitive. It's easy to get stuck in an instant death situation if Kevin is without tools or traps. There are pointless, unavoidable surprise deaths such as when players enter one of the shops in the lobby, only to immediately be captured by a random thug every time. Players who can suffer through the hotel level can thrill to a number of other uninspired outdoor and indoor settings like Central Park and a vacant building. Those really stiff controls become an even greater hindrance here as players contend with more numerous and small enemies, while the platforming bits such as jumping between beams in a warehouse are just about impossible without an incredible amount of devotion to not having fun. Since the only enemies in the movie are the Wet Bandits, and they appear very infrequently, Kevin will spend a lot of the game contending with luggage racks, rats, bouncing balls, and magic manhole covers. The ability to gain temporary firearms doesn't make matters any more fun or lessen the difficulty. A big issue here is that there is often not nearly enough in the movie that translates to a video game experience. Therefore, players must play keep away from vermin in Central Park with a stock of beaded necklaces. It's an ugly, miserable mess.

Reflections: The Christmas this came out, my younger brother and I made our wish lists while flipping through toy catalogs and store circulars. For whatever reason, this title caught my eye and I was somehow convinced it would be a freaking hoot. Knowing that my gift allotment was just about up, I convinced my brother to put it on his list as a sort of shared gift, even though he was well aware at his young age that this would be a bad idea. Christmas came and *Home Alone 2* was indeed under the tree. The first play was enough for me to realize I was a stupid child, but I continued to play it heavily for weeks in an effort to convince myself and my brother that this was the pinnacle of gaming. He was occupied with a far more entertaining LEGO set. I still feel a wave of guilt whenever this comes into my used game store. I was hoping I'd feel better getting this out. I don't! – IF

Hook

Genre: Action
Release Date: Apr. 1992
Developer: Painting by Numbers, Ocean Software
Publisher: Sony Imagesoft
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★⋆

Based on the Steven Spielberg film, players control Peter Pan who sets out to save his children from Captain Hook. Players start on an overhead map to access several platforming and swimming levels. On each level, Peter Pan has to track down a specific number of objects (cherries, treasure, etc.), before being able to exit the level. On the platforming levels, Peter is armed with a mostly useless sword to fend off enemies with horrible hit detection, as well as limited assist attacks from Tinkerbell and the ability to cross chasms with a "flight" power (bouncing on pixie dust). Levels are nicely varied with different locations (cave, lagoons, towns, etc.) and require some exploration via ladders, trampolines, and other platforming elements. The explorative levels are broken up by interesting and fairly impressive third-person Peter Pan flying levels and one-on-one sword-fighting levels. The controls are mostly solid (except for the sword attack) and some good thought went into both the level design and overall game design itself. However, the game falls short in really providing a truly fun experience.

Reflections: I really like what was attempted here, and it somewhat seems to work, but I just couldn't find myself really having any fun while playing this. Maybe it's because I'm not a fan of Peter Pan, nor the movie *Hook*.

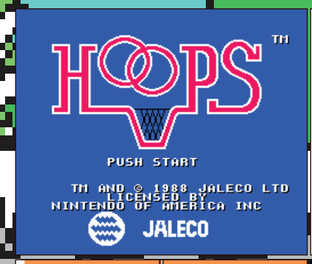
There is a somewhat vicious cutscene that occurs when you lose all your lives – Captain Hook having Peter walk the plank off the pirate ship and fall into the water to his presumable death. It's pretty harrowing to see the execution of a protagonist like that in an NES game, and it genuinely surprised me the first time I saw it. – PC

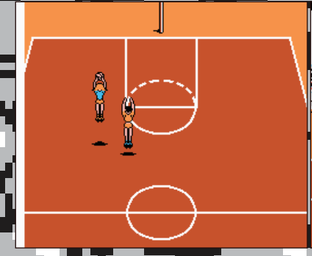
Hoops

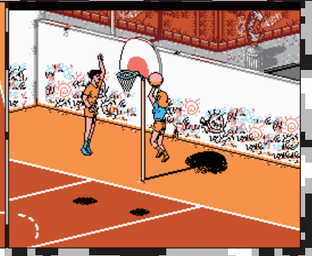
Genre: Sports
Release Date: June 1989
Developer: Aicom
Publisher: Jaleco
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★

This half-court basketball title consists of either one-on-one or two-on-two action. Players select from a cast of eight ballers, all of whom look different and have different strengths/weaknesses in their play. Options include changing the number of points to win a game, winner or loser control after a score, and one of two courts you can play on. Gameplay on the court is very solid. Passing and shooting attempts are simple, although it's rather difficult to make outside shots. On defense it's easy to cover players and switch off (when playing two-on-two). Stealing attempts are easy to pull off and you almost never feel cheated on either side of the ball. Other nice touches include offensive/defensive fouls that when called make sense, nice slam dunk attempt cutscenes, and the option to shoot for possession or play "Around the World" at the start of a match. It's not weighed down with options, but what options do exist, combined with the core gameplay, make this a nice b-ball diversion.

Reflections: *Hoops* is one of those NES games that a ton of people owned, but no one ever talks about. It's a shame, since it's a quality sports experience with some personality, if not the deepest. It's also the only "street sports" game on the NES. On computers in the '80s, there were plenty in that style, so it's nice to see at least one make it onto the NES. This also was an admirable title for equal opportunity, as it featured intergender competition – otherwise it might be a bit awkward for some to have a male player named "Legs." – PC







Hot Slots

Genre: Gambling
Release Date: 1991
Developer: Hacker International
Publisher: Panesian
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Very Rare
★

This slot machine simulator has the player selecting one of three machines to play through, each with different reels/symbols. After putting in one or more tokens to activate one or multiple paylines, the player can then activate the machine. Using the D-pad, the player can then stop the spinning reels in any order they wish. However, where the reels stop at doesn't seem coordinated to the player's D-pad pressing, nor is it random. It strangely seems to be momentum/timing based, as a player can go awhile without winning anything significant, or sometimes find themselves on a hot streak winning continually with no rhyme nor reason. At reaching a few monetary threshold amounts, the game will transition to a cutscene showing one of three partially clothed women, depending on what machine is being played. This companion will talk to the player in bad, misspelled "Engrish." Each subsequent time upon reaching a monetary threshold, the woman will remove more clothing and tease the player by reciting poetry, for example telling the player they can play with her "lucky slot." Finally, after a lot of slot machine grinding and time wasting, the player may be able to see the woman fully nude. Not recommended for fans of slot machines nor nude females.

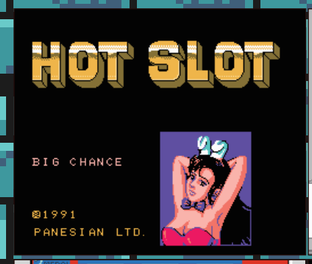
Reflections: I have to wonder what sort of casino has strippers that hang off to the side of slot machines and wait until players reach a certain amount of tokens won to disrobe. Maybe in Taiwan these sort of establishments actually exist? Hacker International couldn't have just thought this idea up on their own, could they have? I mean, *Strip Pick-Up Sticks* or even *Nude Uno* are much more compelling erotic game ideas than playing a boring slot machine. – PC

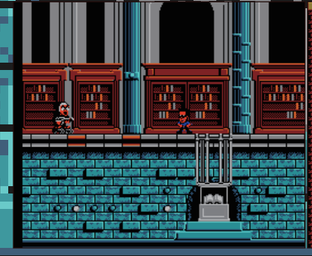
Hudson Hawk

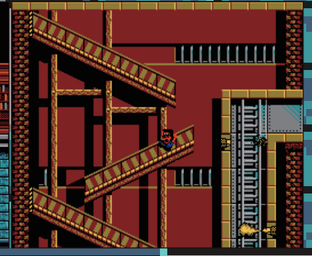
Genre: Platformer
Release Date: Feb. 1992
Developer: Ocean Software
Publisher: Sony Imagesoft
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⋆

Hawk must break into auction houses and museums in order to steal three ancient artifacts in this light-hearted, side-scrolling platformer based on the movie. The player is tasked on avoiding security camera systems and hazardous obstacles while taking on dogs and guards as he platforms through the stages, solving simple crate-pushing puzzles and hitting switches to open more areas. Controlling Hawk is easy: run, duck, shimmy over ropes, and jump and throw balls (the main form of attack). Triggering an alarm causes the screen to flash and flicker, as more guards enter the scene, and cameras try harder to locate Hawk. Once the initial patterns are remembered and guard positioning is figured out, the only difficulty is in the platforming. Stage three really ramps up the difficulty with even more enemies and projectiles to dodge, but there is no timer, so no need to rush. Using the ball as the main form of attack feels cheap, and occasionally the arc of the ball bounces clean over an enemy, forcing an error. Characters are cartoon-deformed in style, which doesn't look out of part, but some of the enemy types are completely bonkers, such as guards on pogo sticks and even nuns that parachute while dropping bombs! As exciting as the music gets, the stage design doesn't let up either. Hallways are littered with chairs, ledges and tables to sprawl over, and there is the obligatory air vent to crawl through for the master thief. It's a fun platformer that doesn't take itself seriously, with its main let-down being the initial inaccessibility that may put some off.

Reflections: Ocean Software was the pioneer of movie tie-ins back in the '80s and early '90s on home computers with classics such as *Robocop* and *The Great Escape*. The transition between computer and consoles proved to be a tricky one for the company with mixed results. *Hudson Hawk* plays like an easier version of *The Addams Family*, which is a credit to it considering there are so many duff film titles floating around the murky depths of the NES library. Throwing a ball as the main form of attack is quite weak, but at least there isn't any "collect the musical notes to complete the robbery" theme in an attempt to mimic Bruce Willis' singing while burglarizing in the actual film. The game doesn't follow the film to the letter, which is probably why it is fun to get stuck into. – JE







The Hunt for Red October

Genre: Shooter, Action-Platformer
Release Date: Jan. 1991
Developer: Beam Software
Publisher: Hi Tech Expressions
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

This side-scrolling submarine shooter is loosely based on the movie of the same name. Players control the Red October through a series of underwater levels culminating in the game's lone platformer level where they must defuse the bombs planted on board the vessel. The levels players navigate in the game are thoroughly bizarre in light of the movie the game comes from, as they are full of things like robotic turrets, mazes of moving pistons, and fields of crystal. Bosses are strange as well, almost always being some oddly futuristic underwater base. Two types of weapons are available, both in limited supply: a homing missile and an upwards firing shot that is good for dealing with depth charges and above-mounted cannons. There is also a defensive weapon, the EMP, which can be used to shake off enemies' homing missiles. One main issue is that these homing missiles are extremely aggressive, whereas the player's own homing missile seems to follow at random, leading to much frustration. Limiting the ammo in any take on the scrolling shooter genre is also never a good idea, potentially leaving the player with nothing to do but lose a life as they await weapon refills in the form of collectible icons. The sub's control is unique and lays the groundwork for an interesting take on the genre, as the nose tips up and down with movement, but the poor graphics and level design often make collisions difficult to avoid (if one can even determine what is or is not an obstacle). Lastly, it's worth noting the odd switch to a platforming level for the end game finale. Players control a Sean Connery-looking fellow and must disable bombs in a sabotaged Red October. Disabling them requires the player to spend a small amount of time with each one without being hit. Ammo is limited and animation is choppy. The graphics in this section are particularly dull and the music is just as basic as the rest of the game. While this last ditch attempt at gameplay variety is nice, it does nothing to improve an otherwise poorly thought-out game.

Reflections: This is definitely high on my list of movies that did not need a video game adaptation. Beam Software once again manages to make the 1991 NES development scene look slightly better than the 1981 Apple // demo scene. Actually, I take that back. Those demosceners deserve a lot more respect. – IF

Hydlide

Genre: Action-RPG
Release Date: June 1989
Developer: T&E Soft
Publisher: FCI
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★

The magic jewels of Fairyland have been stolen, freeing the demon Boralis, who has transformed Princess Ann into three fairies. As Jim, a knight, you must find the fairies and jewels and defeat Boralis. It's a top-down RPG within a framed screen showing your stats at the right (life, strength, experience, and magic) and your spell list on the bottom. SELECT lets you view items, adjust the game speed, temporarily save your game, and get a password. You'll need to save since you'll die frequently. You level up with experience, but grinding takes time, and there's only one curative item in the game. Mercifully, you can regenerate health and magic, but healing depends on the terrain, and some locations damage you. The endlessly spawning monsters include slimes, bats, goblins, kobolds, and more, but you engage most in the same way: by walking into them. You're in defend mode by default, and you hold A for attack mode, increasing damage while making yourself vulnerable. Your sprite remains unchanged; instead, text in the corner of the screen indicates which mode you're using. Attacking enemies from the back or flank boosts damage, but which side is which when enemies don't change appearance with perspective or movement? Pressing A + B casts spells (which consume magic), and pressing B selects them. TURN makes monsters easier to backstab, you can shoot FIRE and ICE, WAVE sends a shockwave, and FLASH hits all enemies. The screen has a health bar for whichever monster you're fighting. To progress, you must find items: a cross to defeat a vampire, a lamp, a key, etc. Some are in overly obscure places, and others are inside dungeon mazes. Exploring isn't that fun, either. Minimal animation, repetitious locations, a meager music loop, monotonous combat, languid leveling, and maddening difficulty conspire to place this among the worst NES games.

Reflections: It's popular (and just) to hate *Hydlide*, but I'll admit it had potential. It debuted in 1984 on Japanese NEC PCs, when RPGs were young. It wasn't influenced by the Ultima series directly, but they share elements in theme, gameplay, and graphics (particularly the grid-based environment). *Ultima V* on PC wasn't much prettier (although storytelling is Ultima's strength). The original Hydlide was acceptable in the '80s, becoming popular enough in Japan to warrant more games, while this NES version is unacceptable. It could've been better with improved presentation, difficulty, etc. Is being faithful always a virtue for ports? Not necessarily. – KN

Ice Climber

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Oct. 1985
Developer: Nintendo R&D1
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

In this vertical platformer, players take control of Popo the Eskimo who has to climb to the top of 32 different vertical mountain stages. Each stage consists of eight different ice layers. The player is armed with a mallet that can smash the ice bricks above their heads via jumping, which can then allow them to the jump up and continue on towards the top of the mountain. After the eight ice layer levels, a timed bonus round will ensue where the player can navigate moving platforms and collect fruit for points, culminating in them attempting to jump up and touch a passing pterodactyl. Player nuisances include flying birds, small yetis who fill in destroyed ice blocks, falling icicles, and a polar bear wearing shades who forces the screen to advance vertically, which gives the player the impetus to hurry. While displaying some cute design and showing signs of fun, the actual play experience is shaky. Jumping horizontally is troublesome and inconsistent, as it's tough to garner distance, and this is made up for by the player being able to seemingly jump through platforms/bricks above them. This lack of pinpoint jumping unfortunately provides most of the game's challenge, rather than interesting enemies or level layouts. A simultaneous two-player mode can provide a small spark, but doesn't add much really to the overall experience.

Reflections: *Ice Climber* was an NES "black box" launch title, and for that it is held in high regard overall as an early, nice little title. However, compared to some of the other launch titles, it's pretty shallow. I think the character design is why the game is often thought of so fondly, and why its Eskimo characters appear in the Super Smash Bros. fighter game franchise. When push comes to shove though, it's not nearly as fun as other early NES black box titles such as *Excitebike*, *Balloon Fight*, or even arcade ports such as *Popeye*.

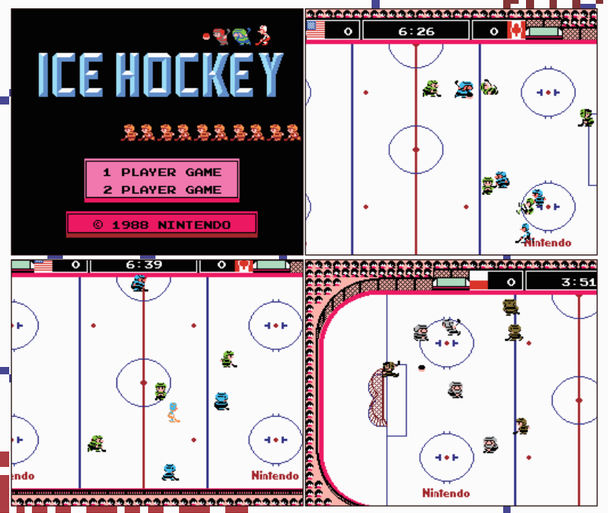
The Japanese version of the game featured seals as enemies instead of yetis, which I'm guessing was supposed to be less offensive for the U.S. audience. To me, it's even more offensive though. Why should I feel more comfortable bashing the head of a mystical and most likely endangered species? – PC

Ice Hockey

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Mar. 1988
Developer: Nintendo R&D2, Pax Softnica
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

Select your team and the size of each of your players and then shoot the puck in this cartoony four vs four ice hockey game, where the object is to score more goals than your opponent. What makes this title work is the combination of fun presentation (goofy and charming audio/visuals) and solid gameplay. The players all skate around and control smoothly, shots can be delayed/powered up by holding/releasing the B button, and you can even control your team's goalie. On defense, players can slash at opposing players for the puck, who may fight back, but if it goes on long enough, a fight will break out for both teams, resulting in a random player being sent to the penalty box. The big selling point here is the ability to choose the size of your four offensive players to customize your team: either skinny (fast but weak), medium (average abilities), or large (slow but powerful). The combination the player chooses will change how the game is played due to their different abilities. The length of the game and even the speed of the puck can be increased in options, which can make for some frenzied action. Great touches like humorous fighting, the Zamboni ice machine, and even penalty shots/overtime add a touch of authenticity and charm to the action. The light-hearted music soundtrack ingratiates itself quickly and fits the game like a glove. A lack of deep game features is something that can be somewhat overlooked, since the quick and energetic gameplay experience is what's pushed to the forefront here, and it's a cool blast.

Reflections: *Ice Hockey*, although not the most popular title, is still just about as close to a "you're not a real gamer if you haven't played this" NES game as you can get. The great thing about this game is that even though it was a relatively early release, it still manages to capture the fun of the ice hockey sport experience while throwing the ol' Nintendo twist on it. Ian still maintains that his "three large, one skinny" team makeup is superior to my "two large, one average, one skinny" strategy that I employ. I would at least consider his *Ice Hockey* strategy argument a little bit if I didn't always beat him by at least 17 goals when we play. – PC



Ikari Warriors

Genre: Run and Gun Shooter
Release Date: May 1987
Developer: SNK
Ported by: Micronics
Publisher: SNK
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

This tedious and overly difficult game is a port of the arcade top-down run and gun shooter. Rambo-esque Paul and Vince use machine guns and grenades to mow down a constant wave of enemy soldiers, tanks, turrets, and other war machines. The controls are adapted poorly from the arcade version, which used a rotary joystick that allowed strafing. Instead of being able to strafe, players turn awkwardly and slowly, with the aim of the accompanying weapon not turning as quickly to match. The player moves and reacts as if in quicksand due to this limitation, which makes competent playing difficult. Besides standard soldiers, overpowered enemies swarm the player, including heat-seeking missiles, suicide bombers, giant tanks, and long range snipers, whose bullets fire five times the length that the player's bullets do. Power-ups are plentiful and can help (like increasing grenade blast range and bullet range), as well as the occasional tank and helicopter that can be used, but are not enough to prevent the near constant string of deaths. In particular, the homing landmines and difficult fortresses will result in many, many lives lost, as will trying to survive as players slog through many river areas, where movement stops to almost a standstill. A simple A-B-B-A continue code offers unlimited continues, but the monotony of the stage design, unfair scenarios, and extremely long and unfun levels will prevent most players from wanting to complete this one.

Reflections: This was one of the first NES games I received at Christmas, and definitely falls into the "learned to love" category. It is strange that SNK thought that they should keep the same circular movement of the player to mimic the arcade's rotary joystick, but without that joystick, it makes no sense for your character to have to slowly turn around to face another direction. I directly blame the insanely long levels as a contributing reason for me needing corrective eyeglasses in grade school. – PC

Ikari Warriors II: Victory Road

Genre: Run and Gun Shooter
Release Date: Apr. 1988
Developer: SNK
Ported by: Micronics
Publisher: SNK
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

Paul and Vince are back to take on aliens in the future in this sequel to the arcade shooter. This time out, players have multiple primary weapons which can be switched between and powered up by collecting their icons: machine gun, flame thrower, boomerang, and sword. Each weapon has strengths/weaknesses as well as effectiveness against certain enemy types. Two secondary weapons (grenades and mines) are also available and have no ammo limit. Moving vertically up, players must take out alien enemies. Some will drop alien currency which the player can use to purchase power-ups inside shops in each level. There, players can also gamble by fighting against one of three enemies to gain alien bucks. The controls are very solid, as holding the B button allows the player to shoot in a singular direction while moving/strafing around. Players are given a health bar, but may still be killed in a single hit, ending the game. Thankfully, the A-B-B-A continue code from the first game is available here as well. The graphics and music are a little above average, but the gameplay isn't too varied, as the enemies move simply and aren't too interesting in appearance or pattern. There's a lot of good ideas here though that makes the title at least worth a whirl.

Reflections: So the story here is that Paul and Vince somehow enter a time portal and are fighting aliens that have taken over the Earth in the future. Being that there aren't any other humans left around, that seems like a futile fight in my estimation.

The few sound samples are hilarious. The game begins with a hearty, "Come on, let's fight!" When entering a shop, the player is greeted with a strangely friendly alien saying, "Welcome!" However, when encountering a boss, what is said is incomprehensible. I've listened to it several times and the closest I can tell is that Paul and Vince are saying "Jesus star!" Maybe the duo attends church on Sunday? – PC

Ikari Warriors III: The Rescue

Genre: Beat 'em Up, Action
Release Date: Feb. 1991
Developer: SNK
Publisher: SNK
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★⋆

Paul and Vince return again to face down enemies and rescue the President's daughter in this overhead brawler. This time out, the player must beat up enemies mainly using punches, kicks, and jump kicks. At times, the player will also be able to pick up and throw enemies, and limited grenades and machine gun ammo can be found. The gameplay itself is stilted with little flow. Sometimes, a steady stream of enemies will come at the player, with each requiring only a single hit, while others will take a dozen hits or so to go down. Likewise, some enemies are mindless drones while others will swarm the player(s) relentlessly. What's strange is that at certain points in the game, the player is given a machine gun to take down enemies/bosses instead of fists/feet, leaving one to wonder why it wasn't utilized as the primary means of attack to begin with. Difficulty is high, with the possibility of one-hit deaths prevalent, regardless of having a health meter. Thankfully, the series tradition of continuing after death still exists here. The action may come at a quick clip at times, but that doesn't necessarily mean that it is interesting to engage in.

Reflections: The story to this game is only slightly less convoluted than Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. It involves a bad economy, a terrorist organization, the President, her daughter, and our favorite half-nude duo.

I'm not sure why Paul and Vince decided to abandon using standard military weapons in fighting terrorism this time out. Is it due to the economic recession cited in the story? It must be affecting the villains as well, since most do not carry guns, and they sometimes even *pick up and throw their comrades at the player*. If there are budget cuts in Ikari Warriors land, perhaps we should work on instituting an economic stimulus to properly arm our warrior friends. While we are at it, maybe we can also finally afford to buy them shirts too. – PC

Image Fight

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: July 1990
Developer: Irem
Publisher: Irem
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

This shooter is a console conversion of Irem's vertically scrolling sci-fi arcade shooter. Players control a ship against numerous enemy forces in a number of "holographic" training stages before battling for real in the final levels. The game is not the smoothest and visuals are mostly plain, but a solid difficulty curve and a good power-up system make up for its lack of visual polish. The boss battles are fun and a refreshing change of scenery, as most of the development team's design talents seemingly went into creating the cool-looking mechanical enemies. The main power-up enhancements are pods of either fixed-forward or rotating fire that attach to the sides and rear of the ship. These can also be fired off as weapons themselves for stronger, short-range attacks. This creates a fair bit of strategy for an early shooter and allows players to sacrifice attack range in the heat of the moment in exchange for staying alive. Other ship attachments allow for spread fire. This game rains bullets quickly and early. It's definitely a challenge, requiring careful use of the four selectable ship speeds which can be changed at any time. This is a far nicer system than requiring players to collect separate speed power-ups, as it allows players to thrive and survive easier from the start. It's not the best the system has to offer for shooter fans, but it's a good bet for fans of the genre.

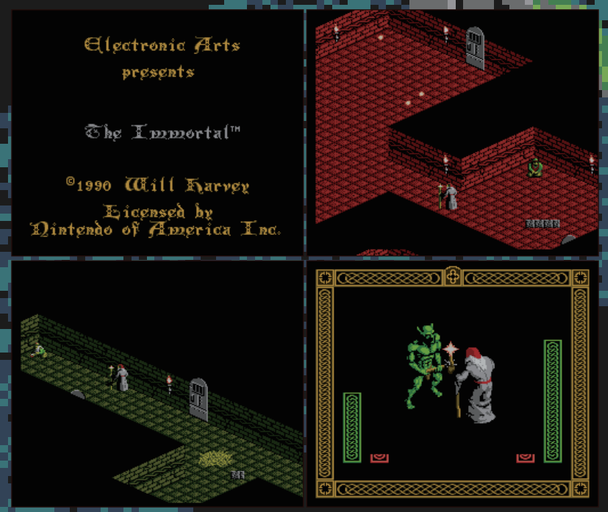
Reflections: This game screams Irem both in challenge and design. Despite the difference in orientation, the ability to fire the pods is very reminiscent of their more popular *R-Type* series, even if the effect is a bit different. – IF

The Immortal (Will Harvey Presents)

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: Nov. 1990
Developer: Sandcastle
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★⋆

Based on the Apple II game by Will Harvey, the player controls a wizard who must brave a dangerous labyrinth to find his teacher Mordamir, who has become trapped while searching for the legendary Fountain of Youth. A unique isometric adventure game, the player must proceed through all seven stages, collecting gold, spells, weapons and other useful items. Originally conceived as an RPG, the game retains some small elements of role-playing, but focuses mainly upon action and puzzle-solving. Puzzles range from finding a set of gems to open a path to the next level, to using a sensor to navigate a floor full of hidden, man-eating worms. The wizard can throw fireballs to dispatch randomly spawning bats, but when confronted by a hostile goblin or troll, the game shifts into a real-time battle mode where the wizard attempts to dodge attacks and slay his opponent with a sword. Strategy is essential to win these battles, and great care must be taken to negotiate the deadly traps that await you. Just one wrong step can result in being skewered, incinerated, or devoured. With no save points, your only option is to persevere, at which point the game finally awards you with a password upon completing the level. While the music, graphics, and animation are all very good by NES standards, the controls in the isometric environment can be difficult to grasp, making some of the longer action-based sequences potentially frustrating.

Reflections: I must admit, I picked up *The Immortal* without fully understanding the challenge involved. Without a doubt, this is one of the most difficult games I have ever played. It will test both your nerves and your patience in ways that few other games can. On the other hand, it has a nice variety of puzzles and an interesting storyline with a little plot twist near the end. While it's not for everyone, both role-playing and adventure game fans should find plenty to like about *The Immortal*. Just "Prepare to Continue..." a lot. – JP

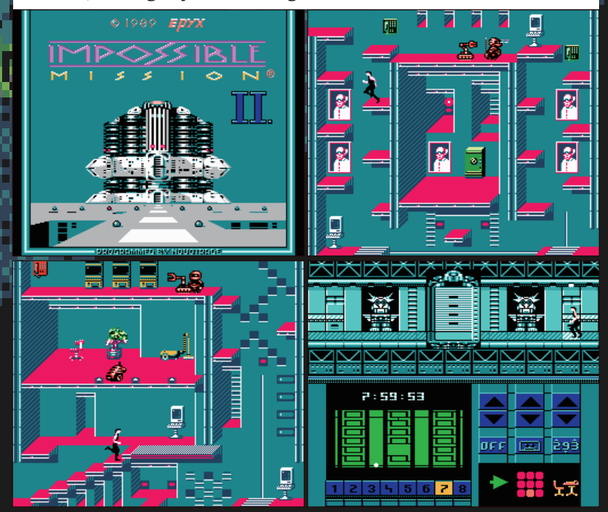


Impossible Mission II

Genre: Platformer, Puzzle
Release Date: 1989
Developer: Novotrade International
Publisher: Epyx, SEI / American Video Entertainment
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★⋆

The evil Elvin Atombender is up to no good once again in this explorative, single-screen platform puzzler. The player takes control of a gymnastically gifted secret agent who must obtain six musical passcodes in order to unlock the inner tower, destroying Atombender's evil machines. There are nine randomized, drab and dull looking towers to explore in eight real time hours, which seems excessive at first, but each time death occurs (which is quite frequently), five minutes is knocked from the timer (which quickly depletes). Each area has searchable objects (lamps, paintings, lockers, etc.) which give essential items and also passcode numbers which unlock the pathways to the next tower. Searching becomes repetitive very quickly and to make matters worse, enemy droids patrolling the halls make life very difficult. They have various ways of attacking: shooting lasers, dropping mines and even pushing the player into pits, killing him instantly! The player can jump across platforms and over enemy droids, but the controls feel unresponsive and awkward. The jump is at a constant speed and direction which usually means instant death if wrongly timed. Mix in the need to pull off pixel-perfect jumps and the game becomes a test of patience. There are no weapons to combat enemies, but bots can be frozen for a brief period using computer consoles strewn about the game. Consoles are used to activate power-ups: light bulbs restore power to blacked-out rooms, lifts can be reset, and bombs can blow open safes which house the precious music codes. These must be used sparingly as the game has a habit of making progress impossible. Send a lift the wrong way or use a bomb at the wrong time and you are stuck, unless suicide is an available option. The only saving grace of death is the fantastic sampled death scream. The idea of having to collect data and passcodes is interesting, but sadly the endless difficulty, added stress of a timer, and terrible controls let down what should have been a fun experience.

Reflections: The extreme difficulty from the start makes this game too punishing to get much enjoyment out of it. If you could take your time to plan each and every movement, jump, and use of each lift, then there would be some strategy. But the timer instills a fear of dread (which does add some atmosphere), making you constantly panic, forcing errors. What should be a cool touch in having the game randomized each play becomes more frustrating as trial-and-error isn't even an option. Additionally, the game looks two-tone dull in that the visuals can't even hold interest for long. The fact that you can get stuck beyond reproach means that this game is out and out broken, ruining any fun that might have been. – JE

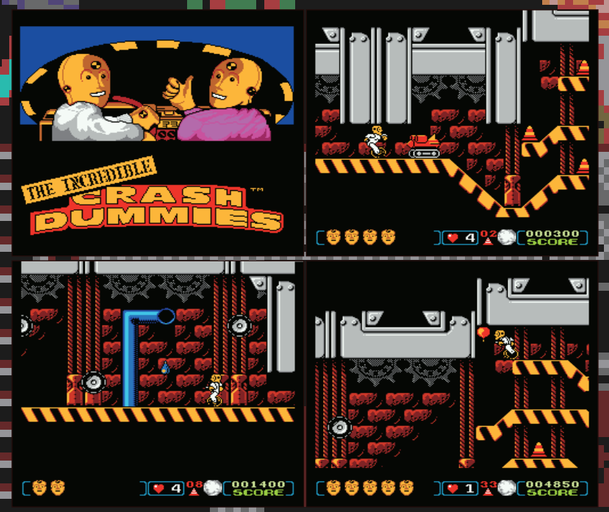


The Incredible Crash Dummies

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Aug. 1994
Developer: Software Creations
Publisher: LJN
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★⋆

Crash test dummies Spare Tire, Daryl, and Bumper have been kidnapped, and it's up to Spin and Slick to rescue them. Play alternates between stages with control of Slick/Spin. Slick moves around on his feet while Spin wheels around on his unicycle legs, which is momentum-based in movement. Stages are varied in look (funhouse, warehouse, junkyard, docks, circus) and the enemies and environmental hazards usually match. However, under the surface sprite changes there doesn't appear to be more than a handful of different enemy types, and most are simplistic in their attacks and patterns (enemies that throw objects and those that travel back and forth being common). Players can stun enemies momentarily with the default air gun but can also find limited oil ammo to destroy enemies entirely. The player will be able to fire hex nuts at the enemy bosses at the end of the last two levels. Balloons can be collected to increase jump length, rockets to boost speed temporarily, arms for a wacky/powerful attack, and steering wheels for temporary invincibility. Collecting 50 traffic cones will award an extra life. A health bar is provided in the form of dummy heads, and they can be picked up throughout the levels to restore life. They are also useful sometimes when Slick or Spin's head will be knocked off, which will result in the player's control being reversed until one is picked up. It's competently produced with above average graphics, peppy music, and even some cutscenes, but it's not a real interesting gaming experience that stands out.

Reflections: The Crash Test Dummies was a hugely popular public service announcement ad campaign put out by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration in the late '80s. They featured Lance and Vince, crash test dummies who would talk to each other and get humorously destroyed through violent car crashes in order to inform the public about the use of safety belts. God knows why, but this set of public service announcements became a line of fairly popular toys for a few years, a cartoon, and even this NES title. It's a good chance that I will never live to see another PSA become a video game again. – PC



Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade

Genre: Action-Platformer, Puzzle
Release: Mar. 1991
Developer: Software Creations
Publisher: Taito
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★⋆

Don the iconic fedora and whip your way through this adaptation of the classic film. There are four missions to complete before the final Holy Grail tests: securing the Cross of Coronado from a Portuguese ship, reconstructing an image of the Grail in a Venice library, rescuing Dad from Austria's Brunwald Castle, and saving Marcus from a tank in Iskenderun. You choose when to complete these tasks, and each mission's difficulty depends on its order in the sequence. In the ship, castle, and tank missions, you control Indiana Jones and use a whip, punches, jumps, and kicks to defeat sailors and Nazis. The castle level is a maze, with many doors, stairs, hidden passages and pitfalls. The Venice mission is a timed tile puzzle that, if completed successfully, will reveal an image of the Grail, which is necessary for selecting the true one from the Grail Knight at the very end. If you fail the castle or tank missions, or if you don't exit the burning Venice library, Dad's indispensable Grail diary is confiscated and must be retrieved via a tricky motorcycle sequence. The penultimate challenge involves a difficult timed sequence of walking across lettered tiles to spell JEHOVAH repeatedly, and then choosing the correct symbol, noted in the diary, as a starting point for crossing a chasm. This game is made for the film's fans, treating them to familiar music and images. It does take liberties with the story that might bother some, but offers varied and interesting gameplay.

Reflections: *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* is not only my favorite film in the series, but one of my favorite movies overall. While I enjoyed the game, I found a few of the above-mentioned liberties simply intolerable! First, every in-game depiction of the Grail is gem-encrusted and gaudy – that's not the cup of a carpenter! And in the Latin alphabet, JEHOVAH begins with an I! And as much as I love Sallah, he didn't discover the Grail's location in three days when Indy's dad had been researching it for 40 years! I get that some changes might have been needed to transform the film into a playable experience, but whoever okayed these alterations? He chose... poorly. – AP

Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Dec. 1993
Developer: Tiertex
Ported by: NMS Software
Publisher: Ubisoft
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★⋆

In this action-platformer, players take on the role of Indiana Jones, who must rescue his father and find the Holy Grail. Action takes place in six different, short timed levels. Gameplay consists of Indy platforming and climbing ropes/ladders on the way to finding the item in that level in the allotted time before reaching the exit. For example, in the first level, Indy must find the Cross of Coronado, and in another all pieces of his father's diary. The game should be commended for following the movie's storyline faithfully, with interspersed bit-mapped shots from the film in between levels to tell the story. That is where the praise ends. Indy is armed initially with his fist to combat the various foes and Nazi soldiers he encounters, but on the second level can thankfully upgrade to his trusty whip or a pistol (three shots) via icons in the level. The problem is that it is very hard to get hits on the enemies without taking damage yourself, and most cannot be avoided in the levels. So players have to wait until the enemies' backs are turned to stay out of danger, but then it can still take up to eight hits to defeat a common enemy. Hearts are few and far between, making it a tough slog. The timer is also too short, and even though there are clocks to increase it, players will still have to rush to not run out of time. If players can barely make it to the end of the levels, they'll face long and uninspired stationary boss battles, which will all involve Indy having to get a few shots in before jumping over the attack, and then repeating for a minute. Graphically, the game is a disappointment with some decent backgrounds, but the characters and Indiana himself are sprites with a singular color tone and strange, noticeable outlines. The singular music track is the main theme from the movie, which you might as well listen to on your VHS movie copy instead of hearing it via this misfire of a game.

Reflections: This is a strange release, not only because it came out four years after the film, but most importantly because another, better NES version about the movie already came out beforehand by Taito! I'll always remember seeing this film in theaters and having a blast. I'll also always remember the gooey kiss that Elsa gives Indy while he's tied up in the castle. – PC

Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom

Genre: Action
Release Date: 1988 / Dec. 1988
Developer: Atari Games
Ported by: Tengen
Publisher: Tengen / Mindscape
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed / Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⋆

Based loosely on the arcade game, the player controls Indiana Jones with his trusty whip in underground caverns where he must rescue all the children on each level, referred to as a "wave." Each wave consists of at least one room that Indy can explore to rescue children and collect items, including other weapons (bomb, pistol, and sword), which can be awkwardly switched to by using SELECT plus the D-pad. On each stage, Indy can use his whip to swing from platforms and conveyor belts, as well as mine carts that will pass by. Along the way he'll have to contend with ladders, lava pits, and enemies like snakes and the Thugees. Control is fine, and swinging with Indy's rope can be fun, but jumping from platforms can often automatically descend you to a lower platform level, sometimes into lava. Rooms wrap around both horizontally and vertically, and the slight degree of freedom is nice. However, the game's simple design gets repetitive, although the music based on the movie is nice to hear. If you can make it past all the waves, you get to face Mola Ram and the iconic rope bridge. NOTE: Two versions of the game's cart exist (unlicensed Tengen and licensed Mindscape), but both games contained within are identical.

Reflections: It's a shame that the NES did not have the power to do a direct port of the arcade version, which consisted of different types of gameplay on different levels, including mine cart chases and temple levels. It's a nice try to bring something still close to the arcade game to the NES, but the final result is a little lacking to me. The licensed, Mindscape version of this game was released after Tengen/Atari ran afoul of Nintendo. – PC

Infiltrator

Genre: Action, Simulation
Release Date: Jan. 1990
Developer: Chris Gray Enterprises
Publisher: Mindscape
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

Take on the Mad Leader as Johnny "Jimbo-Baby" McGibbits in this campy game with two distinct play types. One mode has you piloting the Gizmo™ DHX-3 Attack Chopper from a first-person view. The instrument panel displays the fuel level, airspeed, altitude, artificial horizon, and more. You access a computer terminal for a map, damage/weapons status, and a heading to enter into the Automatic Direction Finder to guide your flight. You can engage other aircraft with missiles/guns and deter their missiles with chaff/flares. However, it's better to ask for their identification. Based on the name they give, you identify yourself as a pilot on their side. Then, save for the rare renegade, they simply fly off. When you reach your destination, it's landing time, in which you wrestle not only with your helicopter's angle, rate of descent, and sound-cutting "Whisper Mode," but also with Jimbo-Baby's twitchy hands on the controls, which seem determined to slam you into the earth sideways. Should you succeed, you now must control Jimbo-Baby from a third-person perspective to sneak in/around enemy buildings and complete one of three missions: rendering a supply of nerve gas harmless, saving Dr. Phineas Gump, and demolishing missile control rooms. Many guards will accost you, but they can be temporarily pacified by the phony identification papers or sleeping gas grenades/spray in your inventory. You must also sweep for mines outside buildings, and search inside for security cards to open doors. The time limits are too severe, as there are multiple buildings, each with many rooms to explore. It also takes very little for the guards to turn on the alarm, unless you can find a disguise in one of the buildings. This game is ambitious, humorous, and interesting, but is often too difficult to remain fun for long.

Reflections: When I first played the piloting portion of this game, I had a hard time telling if the other aircraft were friendly or not based on their names. I mean, Bonehed and Dedhed were bad guys, obviously, but what about Scarr and Warthog? Those sounded like enemies to me, but nope! Good guys! And I couldn't guess that Eugene was an enemy. Eugene doesn't sound like an evil henchman name. It sounds like the guy who'd walk home with you after school and let you copy his pre-algebra homework. But maybe that's just it. He got tired of being used for his brain and decided to turn evil in his insatiable quest for power and recognition. Don't do it, Eugene! We need guys like you! Guys who'll carry our books and tell us we're super cool! Please Eugene! Come back! ... Oh well. At least we still got Arnold on our side. He said *he'd* be back... – AP

Iron Tank: The Invasion of Normandy

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: July 1988
Developer: SNK
Publisher: SNK
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

This overhead tank shooter takes place during World War II. It is fairly unique and features nice graphics and sounds. Solid controls allow the player to shoot in the direction they are facing with machine guns (B), while aiming and shooting shells independently via the tank's turret (A), allowing the ability to strafe and destroy enemy tanks, soldiers, etc. Power-ups with limited use are available and can be stored for use and selected via the menu, one at a time or in combination with one another: rapid-fire, explosive shells, armor-piercing, and longer range shells. There's also a screen-clearing weapon, health pick-ups, and allied soldiers the player can pick up to help. Enemies are somewhat varied for a game of this nature, including several types of enemy tanks, planes, trains, and large boss vehicles. There are also different paths you can take along the journey, allowing for some good replayability. The difficulty for a game of this nature is fairly high, however, but fortunately continues and a password function help with this. Check it out for some high-octane tank action.

Reflections: SNK sure doesn't like to make their action games easy, do they? I am absolutely certain also that SNK were not students of history, as I don't think I recall any Normandy action of this type in *The Longest Day* and *Saving Private Ryan*. I feel guilty whenever I run over the cute chubby green foot-soldiers who are mostly harmless, unless they're Nazis of course. If that's the case, go into Captain America mode and mow 'em down! – PC

IronSword: Wizards & Warriors II

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Dec. 1989
Developer: Zippo Games
Publisher: Acclaim Entertainment
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★⋆

In this sequel, the knight Kuros is once again tasked with defeating Malkil, who has returned in the form of the four major elements of Wind, Water, Earth, and Fire. To do so, however, he must reassemble the fragments of the shattered Ironsword guarded by each elemental. The game world is divided into four areas, each one heavily influenced by its respective element. For instance, the domain of Wind is a realm of billowing clouds, while the sanctum of Earth exists in a subterranean cavern. In each stage, Kuros must find a golden artifact and present it to an animal king to open the path to the boss. For instance, the king of the water realm, a giant frog, requires a Golden Fly in order to pass. As in the first game, Kuros wields a sword he can use while standing and crouching. New to the series is the inclusion of shops where the player can purchase armor, weapons, and spells which serve several functions, like granting invincibility or summoning a waterspout to reach higher areas. Since the elementals can only be defeated with spells, the player must find that particular scroll within the level before confronting the bosses. The graphics have improved over the first game, and although it plays very similarly to its predecessor, the length of each stage and the rarity of health recovery items within make it much more difficult. Fortunately, the game features a password system which allows the player to save their progress.

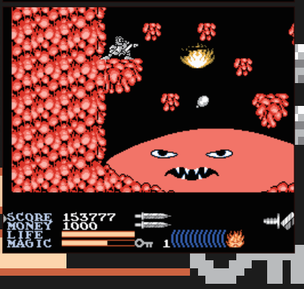
Reflections: Perhaps most notable for its cover art, which features Italian model Fabio Lanzoni as Kuros, Ironsword is a fairly average platformer. It does offer some interesting improvements over the first game, but the difficulty tends to kill any enthusiasm I might have otherwise had for it. However, those who don't mind a challenge may still find it worthwhile. – JP

Isolated Warrior

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Feb. 1991
Developer: KID
Publisher: NTVIC
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★⋆

Max Maverick is on a mission to save the planet of Pan from invading alien forces in this scrolling isometric shooter. He must blast incoming waves of enemies while avoiding pits and other landscape hazards before taking on a boss at the end of each of the seven levels. Max can jump, shoot, and use bombs to fight enemies that range from tiny drones to a huge floating head with an exposed brain. Defeated foes may drop power-ups to augment Max's bombs and his two selectable firing modes - Focusing (L) and Spreading (W). The landscapes he travels through are colorful and creative and occasionally include nice little graphical tricks. Dilapidated cities, chilling wastes, and techno fortresses are all represented. Some of the levels have Max use a jetpack or a hoverbike. This doesn't change up the gameplay too much, but it does add some variety and new obstacles. The soundtrack is driving and fits the stages and theme well. Unfortunately, the gameplay doesn't quite live up to the packaging. Lining up shots can be difficult due to the overhead isometric viewpoint. The game throws a fairly hefty amount of enemies onto the screen, and in the busier sections, this leads to a lot of flicker and some slowdown. Controlling Max can feel a little floaty, and the bomb weapon is awkward to use as it must be thrown and aimed mid-jump. Despite these flaws, it's a fun, unique shooter, and getting acclimated to the viewpoint and the performance issues is worthwhile. Overall, it does a solid job of putting players into the boots of a futuristic commando, and that's respectable.

Reflections: Isometric shooters are few and far between, with Sega's *Zaxxon* (1982) being arguably the most well known in the genre. A lack of similar titles helps *Isolated Warrior* stand out in the NES library, but playing it gives some sense as to why the genre never took off. An isometric viewpoint may be eye catching, but rarely will it feel natural to play in. It can be fun for sure, but as a whole it was an experiment that never really clicked. – IF



Ivan "Iron Man" Stewart's Super Off Road

Genre: Racing
Release Date: Apr. 1990
Developer: Leland
Ported by: Rare
Publisher: Tradewest
Players: 1-4 (simultaneous)
Special Features: NES Four Score / Satellite compatible
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

In this overhead single-screen racer, the player takes control of a truck against three opponents on eight different dirt tracks filled with obstacles such as bumps, hills, logs, water hazards, and more. These obstacles will bounce the truck around and affect its speed and control abilities. The player drives around the course doing laps, and along the way can pick up cash that appears as well as nitro, which can be used by the player at any time for a quick, short speed burst. Points are earned to continue on in the circuit and cash is earned to upgrade your truck at the end of the race for better acceleration, top speed, shocks, and tires. Additional nitro bursts may also be purchased. Controls are pretty good for keeping the racing exciting over the interesting array of courses. The game is fast-paced, fun, and challenging after you get a dozen or so races in, making truck upgrades essential for keeping pace. It's a very solid port of the arcade game, and the fact that you can have up to four players (one more than the arcade version) makes this a great party game. This game is probably best enjoyed though, in quick nitro-like bursts.

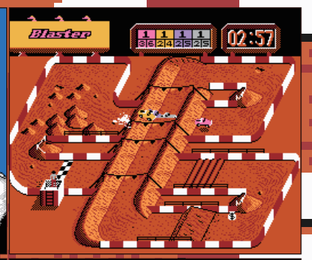
Reflections: Was this game enjoyable in the arcade, or what? You had the steering wheel that you could just spin out of control, and the cool metal pedal. You could also keep playing forever as long as a computer player did not finish in front of you. Although the SNES port of *Super Off Road* had superior graphics, gameplay, and even added more courses, it unfortunately maxed out at only two players and not four. The NES version, although graphically inferior, still kept the same great spirit the arcade game had, although they did cover up the trophy babes quite a bit by changing their arcade bikinis into short dresses. By the way, I've never heard of "Ironman" Stewart, but he sounds like a real swell dude. – PC

Jack Nicklaus' Greatest 18 Holes of Major Championship Golf

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Mar. 1990
Developer: Sculptured Software
Publisher: Konami
Players: 1-4
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★⋆

In this golf title, players begin by selecting up to four human and/or computer opponents (with different attributes) in a traditional strokes game or skins (money). Players may select the starting tee length for each player and if clubs are automatically selected for human players (beginner) or not (expert). Players swing for the green on one golf course constructed of 18 holes from several different real golf courses. On screen, players will see their golfer, all the important info (wind, selected club, yards to hole, etc.), as well as a 3D-style visual representation of what can be viewed at the time. Pressing START will enable seeing the entire hole. Whenever the screen of the golfer reappears after accessing the menu or when the ball moves, the course is redrawn, which unfortunately slows the game down. Players swing via a meter, which starts by hitting the A button. Players can stop the meter with A near the top for maximum power (going into the red is a weaker overswing), and the amount of hook/slice on the ball versus hitting straight is accomplished by hitting the A button again on the bottom of the meter's green section. When the ball is hit, the viewpoint does not change, so the player does not see where the ball lands until the next swing opportunity when the screen is redrawn. Controls overall are disappointing, especially when trying to aim left/right to compensate for wind or a break on the green. It's far less intuitive than it should be, resulting in clumsy trial and error. There's also no backspin opportunity available, which is strange. These faults drag the title down a bit, and the lack of substantial features won't help you make it out of the clubhouse.

Reflections: Originally a PC title published by Accolade (which became a long-running franchise), this one didn't quite make a successful transition to the NES. It was surprisingly published by Konami, who usually do not publish titles they do not also develop, at least on the NES. And maybe you can see why, as this is arguably the worst Konami-published NES game. There's not much else to say about this subpar golf game, except perhaps for noting that it has the longest title of a game on the NES. So there's that. Lastly, the TurboGrafx-16 version of the game is collecting dust on the bottom of my game shelf. – PC



Jackal

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Sept. 1988
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Konami
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★½

As a jeep commando, venture back into Vietnam to rescue POWs in this overhead automotive shooter. The jeep is armed with a machine gun turret, which only shoots in a northern direction no matter which way the player moves, as well as an upgradable powerful secondary weapon which can be fired in any of the eight directions. Players will have to avoid and take out enemy soldiers, tanks, turrets, boats, helicopters, and a lot more as they progress at their own pace in the levels filled with gates, obstacles, mines, and buildings – some of which can be destroyed. Destroyed buildings will reveal the POWs who will climb onto the jeep if it's stopped in front of the building. Flashing POWs will upgrade the secondary weapon from a grenade launcher to missiles, and then will increase the exploding range. POWs can be dropped off at a helicopter pad for bonus points to earn extra lives. The action is unrelenting in areas and the very tight controls allow the one-hit deaths to be an adequate and fair challenge. At certain points in the game, the stages will allow just about no room for error when weaving in and out of fire while destroying enemies with missiles/grenades, making for vigorous action. Stage bosses are equally engaging due to their surprises which will keep the player on their toes. A rousing soundtrack and a quality two-player mode rounds out a sharp and refined shooter.

Reflections: Call *Jackal* the overhead vehicular *Contra*! The cutscenes are quirky and cute with the soldiers looking at a map and wondering where to go next, or them screaming "Yeah!" as they drive into battle.

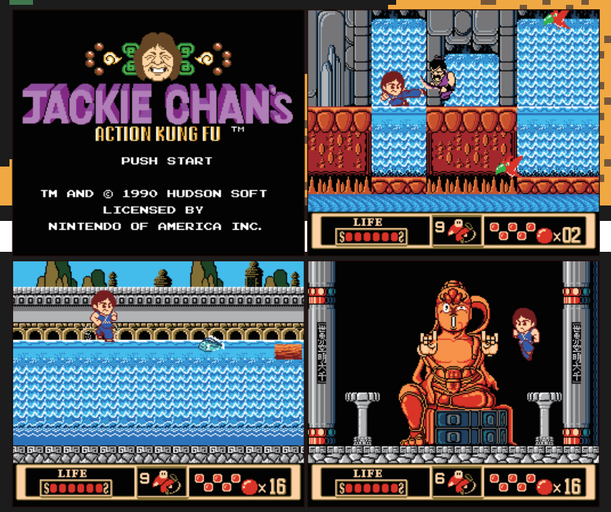
This game also has the distinction of being the first one I fell asleep to while playing during the NES Charity Marathons I've done. During the first marathon, it was roughly 2 a.m. and I was Jackaling it up when I nodded off for about 10 seconds or so. It was only when Ian whistled along with the music that I awoke and continued playing as if I had not skipped a beat. I then remained awake for the duration of the rest of the 31-hour marathon. – PC

Jackie Chan's Action Kung Fu

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Dec. 1990
Developer: Now Production
Publisher: Hudson Soft
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★★

Actor/martial artist Jackie Chan must rescue his sister from the evil Sorcerer in this cute and colorful kung-fu romp. Player's guide Jackie through each varied side-scrolling level navigating tightly designed platforming elements and defeating a cartoony cast of enemies. Combat is intuitive and snappy with Jackie having a punch, crouch kick, and jump kick. Item frogs can be hit for power-ups including additional health and some limited-use moves like different special kicks/attacks, activated with B + UP. Five "psycho wave" fireballs can be thrown by holding B to charge and fire them, and can be replenished by collecting 30 jade icons. Monks, masked baddies with sickles, trout, snails and all sorts of vibrant characters keep the action fresh. Most enemies take one or two hits but larger threats like tigers are best disposed of with the stronger moves, like tornado kicks, obtainable throughout the game. Bosses are large, some with multiple segments, with fun patterns to learn and beat. Some sections focus more on combat while others are designed around precise jumps. Occasional auto-scrolling segments keep things different and challenging, such as bonus levels that require Jackie to make many successive jumps on small, disappearing clouds. Levels are easy on the eyes and consist of various temples, sky levels, ice caves and outdoor fields. While the graphics are mostly fantastic, some areas can become confusing when flatness and color choice make determining foreground and background difficult. The loveable Jackie Chan makes a great hero for a very fun game.

Reflections: A port of a TurboGrafx-16 game of the same name. I think this fares much better than the port of *Bonk's Adventure*, which I always felt was vastly inferior to the original. While this port isn't as colorful or detailed, there are actually a few things I like better, most of all the more cutesy, not quite as terrifying sprite of Jackie Chan. – IF



James Bond Jr.

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Nov. 1992
Developer: Eurocom
Publisher: THQ
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★

The player takes on the role of a young secret agent trying to thwart the evil SCUM organization in four side-scrolling missions. James Jr. has many weapons/items at his disposal to help him accomplish his task and take out the various aggressive enemies, such as scuba gear, bombs, a jet pack, flares, etc. The presentation is solid with good graphics, big sprites, and nice cutscenes to tell the story. The game falters during the action, however. Controls are adequate but the player's main weapon, the pistol, is so severely underpowered that it takes at least a dozen shots to take out even common enemies, and the tougher "boss-like" enemies will take what seems like 50 before going down. This slows the game to a crawl in many places, and makes the necessary exploratory aspects of the level seem more of a chore than an adventure. Combine that with timer-based levels and inane and unnecessary "hacking" mini-games and you come up with a game filled with good ideas that tries to do a little too much and falters in the process.

Reflections: James here is actually supposed to be the nephew of the famous 007, so it's strange that he has the same first name. And being a Jr. means that his father is also named James, so that really means James Bonds' parents named two of their sons the same name. The hell?!

This game was based on a cartoon that was on the air at the time. I'm not sure why it was thought it was a good idea to have a teenage James Bond instead of the real deal. Somewhere in the early '90s it was decided that children should rather watch shows of teens and children instead of adults, which is why the great cartoons of the '80s led to such a steep quality decline in the '90s. Yeah, *G.I. Joe* or *James Bond Jr.*? Which is the one again that no one in the world remembers or cares about? – PC

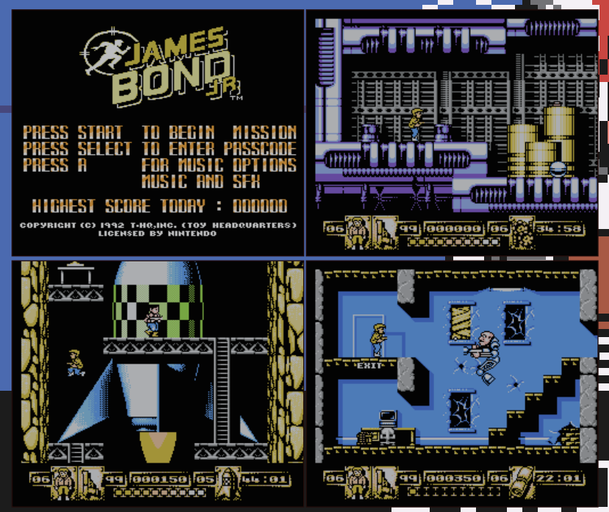
Jaws

Genre: Action
Release Date: Nov. 1987
Developer: Westone Bit Entertainment
Publisher: LJN
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

Based upon the classic horror film, players are tasked to sail the seas to kill a great white shark. Gameplay consists of an overhead ocean map where players have to move their boat between two different ports. Along the way, the boat will randomly be hit by something, which will engage the main play mode – scuba diving. Here, players have to destroy jellyfish, sea rays, and mini-sharks via speargun to continue on. Some enemies will drop conch shells, which can be redeemed at the ports to increase the player's speargun power. Along the way, players can engage in airplane bonus rounds to destroy jellyfish for extra shells. A mini-sub can also be collected when it randomly appears on the map, which powers up the player in scuba mode. Players can also track and encounter Jaws himself. When that occurs, players (if powerful enough) can drain Jaws' health via spear gun to engage the final scene. This is a first-person mode where the player has three attempts to kill Jaws using the boat's bow to ram him. The game is competently made and is structured fine, but it is fairly short and pretty repetitive. It won't enrapture, but it works for a quick, fishy experience.

Reflections: I really hope I'm not biased in this review, as I owned *Jaws* as a kid. My mom once took me to a flea market that was literally within view of Rahway State Prison. A very reputable and LEGIT salesman just happened to have at least a half dozen brand new copies of Jaws for sale for only $10 each. Being that new NES games were about $40-50 at the time, of course we picked one up! I remember enjoying this title as a child, but I don't remember playing it much after beating it.

It wasn't until years later when I remember watching the actual *Jaws* movie, and being horrified when Quint gets bitten in half in the boat. Woops, spoilers! It was quite a different experience than spearing innocent jellyfish creatures en masse. – PC



Jeopardy!

Genre: Game Show, Trivia
Release Date: Sept. 1988
Developer: Rare
Publisher: GameTek
Players: 1-3 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★⯪

Based on the television trivia game show, the player faces up to two other opponents (either human or CPU), as they are given long-form answers to questions from specific categories and are asked to supply the appropriate question, such as "Who was Washington?" or "What is a video game?" Players set up the game by selecting the difficulty, entering their name, and selecting a character model. The six categories with five questions each are then displayed before the round. The first player selects the category and monetary amount, with more difficult questions being assigned higher dollar amounts. The question (answer) is displayed, and then players can buzz in and attempt to solve by selecting the letters to spell the answer in a limited amount of time. Monetary values are added to the player's total for correct solutions, and taken away from the total for wrong ones. The player with the correct response will select the next question. Wrong solutions given by the CPU are handled randomly, with the player seeing the correct answer, but with symbols in place of most of the letters of the correct answer. The winner is the player with the most money at the end of two rounds and Final Jeopardy (where you can risk any or all of your money on the last question). The game does a good job of translating the game show experience, as questions are appropriately easy or difficult, and there is a nice variety of question categories. You most likely will see the same questions repeated in subsequent games more often than you may like, probably due to memory limitations. If you want a *Jeopardy!* fix, this title does a fine job.

Reflections: I have fond memories of this game. I would borrow it from my grandfather's neighbor when I went on vacations. This neighbor happened to own almost every NES game released between 1985-1988, and just about all remained unopened on the shelf in his rec room. I would be allowed to open and take any games I'd want as long as I returned them. So because of that, I'd be able to play and lose consistently to my older sister at *Jeopardy!* in Ocean City, Maryland when we were staying in a rental condo. I want a rematch NOW, sis. The yellow-skinned contestants always bothered me. I'm not sure why jaundice runs amok amongst the NES GameTek world population. – PC

Jeopardy! 25th Anniversary Edition

Genre: Game Show, Trivia
Release Date: June 1990
Developer: Rare
Publisher: GameTek
Players: 1-3 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⯪

This NES version of the hit game show is almost exactly the same as the regular *Jeopardy!* game, except that this 25th anniversary edition has 2,000 new "answers" to solve. Please refer to the review of the original for more detail.

Reflections: This version of the game is probably the one you want to get if you're a Jeopardy buff. Now this isn't scientific, but I think this version does a better job of rotating the categories/questions so you don't see the same ones too often. Thanks, Alex! – PC

Jeopardy! Junior Edition

Genre: Game Show, Trivia
Release Date: Oct. 1989
Developer: Rare
Publisher: GameTek
Players: 1-3 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⯪

This NES version of the hit game show is almost exactly the same as the regular *Jeopardy!* game, except that this version has questions that are supposed to be geared more toward teens, pre-teens, and children. However, when playing, this may not always be the case, as some questions may challenge adults just as well. Please refer to the review of the original for more detail.

Reflections: I know how this game is titled and marketed, but when one of the first questions I click on is asking a *Leave it to Beaver* question or something about World War II, I'm not so certain it's geared towards youngsters. I expected questions asking about state capitals or something more resembling *Saturday Night Live's* "Celebrity Jeopardy" skits. – PC

The Jetsons: Cogswell's Caper!

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Dec. 1992
Developer: Natsume
Publisher: Taito
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★★

In this adaptation of the famous futuristic cartoon series, George Jetson sets out to stop the mining facility set up by Mr. Cogwell's competing company. George can defend himself against the numerous robots and other other enemies by picking up and throwing boxes, apples, and whatever else he can get his hands on. George can also acquire and use secondary offensive/defensive weapons that will be given to him by characters throughout the eight different stages. They can be used as long as George has enough power packs which can be acquired consistently in the levels. Controls are pretty tight, and the platforming of the varied stages is both inventive and challenging. They are littered with elevators, trampolines, moving platforms, and switches to alter the levels in inventive ways, including anti-gravity switches that enable George to walk on the ceiling for a short amount of time. Other difficulties of levels includes lava that rises, levels that auto scroll horizontally or vertically, and one where George has to run away from giant cogs that will crush him. The presentation is top-notch here, with very good music and graphics that do the cartoon license justice. Fans of the cartoon will be in for a treat, as well as anyone who enjoys high quality action-platformers.

Reflections: I was never a fan of *The Jetsons* (or *The Flintstones* for that matter). It's probably due to the fact that the cartoon was not really new for my generation, but either way this is a quality game! It's part of the "Hanna Barbera Super Stars" line-up, which really is only this title and *The Flintstones: The Surprise at Dinosaur Peak*, which is using what looks to be the same exact game engine. This game had a much wider release than that title though, which is why you don't see this one being hoarded by game scalpers and those trying to take advantage of the game collecting community. But it's not like that bothers me. No, not at all! – PC

Jimmy Connors Tennis

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Nov. 1993
Developer: NMS Software
Publisher: Ubisoft
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★⋆

This tennis game features players competing in matches all around the world for cash prizes on one of three different court types. Sixteen tournament finals matches are available, each with their own prize money and type of court: clay, grass, and hard. Players begin by selecting the difficulty, number of sets per game, and entering their name before beginning. The strength of this game is the depth of the controls. Players can hit the ball with normal speed or fast, choose the depth of the shot, choose the direction of each shot, and further control the speed and angle of the shot by how long the player holds the racket back before swinging. Players can also attempt the standard lob shot or a drop shot depending on where on the court the ball is. The large level of control makes for some interesting tennis gameplay. However, it's not a complete experience, as net play and volleying is lacking. The difficulty is also set too high, as even on "easy" mode the computer opponents are very challenging. A password option allows players to track their monetary progress, although only the most hardcore of NES tennis players will get far enough to enjoy it.

Reflections: When this game was released, Jimmy Connors was over 40 years old and at the end of his career, so I'm not sure why he was chosen as the name and face of this game. This is one of the only games I've ever seen where the option to have the music on or off is the very first menu item that the player has to access and choose before even selecting the number of players. I sense a definite lack of confidence in your composing talent, NMS Software. – PC

Joe & Mac

Joe & Mac: Caveman Ninja (PAL)
Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Dec. 1992
Developer: Data East
Ported by: Elite Systems
Publisher: Data East
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★⋆

Cavemen pals Joe and Mac set out to rescue a group of cavewomen in this prehistoric action-platformer. Initially armed with a throwing axe, players will platform and toss their weapon at small dinosaurs, cavemen, and flying enemies like pterodactyls. Controls are average, with there being a slight delay when throwing weapons (they can also be thrown straight up), and the default jump being too short to do much, with a much higher jump available via A + UP. Players have a health bar, which is usually sufficient. However, when players fall into water pits a large chunk will be taken away. Keeping the health meter filled is essential for the boss fights, which can become drawn-out wars of attrition. Food pick-ups to restore health are scarce, but different weapons can be obtained by cavemen who drop vases: boomerang, wheel, fire, and a flint knife. These all have different attributes, range, and strength; all can be powered up for longer range and damage by holding B to charge. The player will flash, and the weapon must be thrown in a limited amount of time or else Joe will tire and lose a significant amount of life. Gameplay design elements like these frustrate and limit the fun factor, as do the ridiculously short levels, some of which can be run through in less than 30 seconds. The graphics are well above average, although the color palette could use some more vibrance. The large, well-defined boss dinos are particularly impressive. However, the game will repeat the same few ones multiple times. It's well-polished on the surface, but the limited amount of enemies, control flaws, and short overall length make this one a head-scratcher.

Reflections: I have a soft spot for the SNES version of *Joe & Mac*, which not only is a great game because of the vibrant graphics and fun theme (also known as *Caveman Ninja* in the arcade), but also due to its great two-player co-op mode, which this poorer version unfortunately lacks. I have to comment on the Venus flytrap boss, which shows up fairly early, but is extremely difficult. I got my butt handed to me about 10 times before I beat it, and then it was more by chance than skill. Most of the remaining bosses I could waltz through (including the final boss), but that dumb plant caused me so much pain. – PC

John Elway's Quarterback

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Mar. 1989
Developer: Leland
Ported by: Rare
Publisher: Tradewest
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★

This port of the arcade football game consists of single one- or two-player games. After selecting a team (which all look and play the same), the action begins. On offense and defense, one of several different plays can be chosen to run. Gameplay is fairly smooth and the graphics are nicely converted from the arcade version. On offense, players can pass off or throw the ball with the B button, but it is awkward and overly difficult. When attempting a pass, the player does not select a receiver but rather must hold the B button and maneuver an arrow to the spot they want to pass to before releasing the button. However, this process takes a considerable amount of time and will usually result in the quarterback being tackled unless running away from the defenders while holding the button. This poor design prevents running an offense properly and makes gaining yards just as much luck as skill. A bug (feature?) kept from the arcade version features insanely fast receivers by not selecting a play and keeping the play selection on "Normal" when returning to start the next down of action. With no game modes to speak of and questionable gameplay, what could have been promising ends up lackluster.

Reflections: For some strange reason I rented this game one time as a child. To say this was a step down from *Tecmo Bowl* is a vast understatement. The only way I could ever pull off a proper play was to select the "Bomb" and then scramble for my life before heaving the ball to a receiver.

In the arcade, this game was simply known as *Quarterback*. The John Elway endorsement on the NES simply added his mug to the game art and nothing else. While a decent port, the source game it was based on reflected a typical arcade football experience at the time - no real options. It's a shame that for the NES version they didn't even add in different uniform colors to reflect the different teams. Come on, Elway! Pick a better game endorsement! Your reputation is on the line! – PC

Jordan vs. Bird: One on One

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Aug. 1989
Developer: Electronic Arts
Portd by: Rare
Publisher: Milton Bradley
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⋆

As the title suggests, this is one-on-one basketball with two of the game's greatest squaring off against each other. Play is basic but recreates one-on-one court action about as best it could. You can cover, maneuver, shoot threes, and even commit fouls, as the rules are accurate (although the computer AI is very weak). As a single-player game it's unremarkable and bland, but the two-player mode is definitely more fun with the human element helping the game feel less robotic. The developers tried to bulk up the content by including two mini-games focusing on each legend's skills to complement the main game. The three-point shootout has players controlling Bird as they try to land as many three point shots as possible within a certain time limit. This mode is fairly decent fun, and playing a couple rounds to see just how many one can score can get addicting despite being very simple. Jordan gets a slam dunk contest that fares much worse. Players must complete a set of different dunks with each one being triggered by shooting in specific locations on the court. Getting the timing and position on some of these can be quite frustrating. Worse, it's just boring and not fun. Eventually learning and memorizing the sweet spots takes all of the "game" out of this mode. What is left is half a good game, as the shootout and two-player mode trump single-player and the slam dunk contest. Good for an occasional play.

Reflections: I remember this game more for its Tiger handheld incarnation, which every budding jock in elementary school owned. That might have been the more amusing version. This title was actually preceded on home computers by *One on One: Dr. J vs. Larry Bird*, and was a bit of a technical showcase for its time. – IF

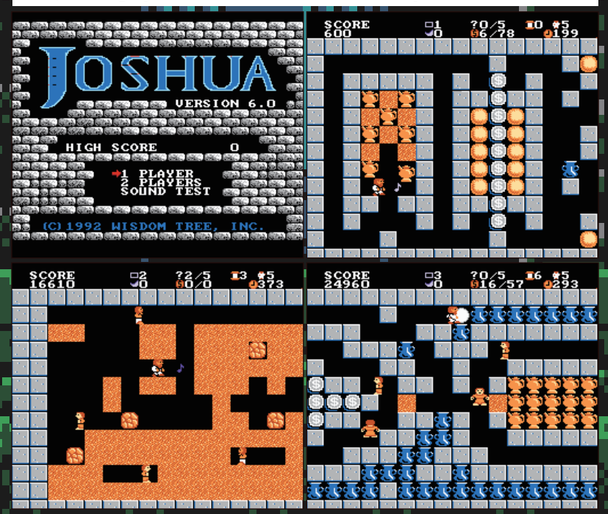
If you put a gun to my head and asked me to successfully complete a Jordan "windmill" dunk in the game's slam dunk contest, you better get Acme's Carpet Brain Stain Remover ready. – PC

Joshua & the Battle of Jericho

Genre: Action, Educational
Release Date: 1992
Developer: Wisdom Tree
Publisher: Wisdom Tree
Players: 1-2
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★½

In this sequel to *Exodus*, you play as Joshua, Moses' successor. In each of the 100 gridded maze rooms, your goal is to collect five question icons (represented by a quizzical face) and a pre-determined quantity of the Lord's Objects before time runs out. Four types of items count toward the latter requirement: iron vessels add one to your tally, brass oil pots add three, silver coins add five, and gold coins add 10 to your total. Impeding your quest are a number of enemies, such as wandering Hittite Citizens, floating heads of Stubborn Gezerites, and surprisingly dangerous Enemy Goats. Additionally, the levels themselves are full of obstacles, including nearly identical indestructible and destructible walls, pushable boulders, falling rocks, transformable Gibeonite squares, detonating Foreign Idols, deadly-to-the-touch Foreign Temples, etc. Fortunately, Joshua can move in eight directions and comes armed with his famous trumpet, which rapid-fires music notes in four directions and can be upgraded to fire farther/faster by collecting music icons (upgrades disappear if Joshua dies). He also collects Ram's Horns, which act as time bombs with a three-by-three square range. Additionally, there are temporary power-ups like God Speed, which doubles his rate of movement, Louder Trumpet, which makes music notes travel through multiple obstacles, Shovel, which allows him to run through most objects, the Ark of the Covenant, which protects him from Foreign Temples/Lord's Hail, etc. Should you succeed in collecting all the questions and items, an exit square will appear; some levels include concealed bonus exits as well. Next, you take a five question multiple-choice quiz about Joshua. Correct answers give you a Bible, and 10 Bibles grant an extra life. This game is largely the same type of experience as its predecessor, with some improvements, such as new power-ups, and some omissions, such as music during levels. It's worth playing if you enjoyed *Exodus*, or simply if you enjoy puzzles.

Reflections: *Joshua* is surprisingly quiet. You do get music at the intro, brief jingles for right/wrong quiz answers, and a ditty for the 10 or 20 seconds a power-up lasts, but you don't have any actual background music during gameplay. It alternates between sound effects and silence, with a smattering of digitized speech telling you to "be courageous" before each level. It seems weird for a game where music notes are your main means of attack to have so little music. But that's not the only thing that's out of tune. Joshua's music notes are powerful – they defeat enemies, tear down walls, and obliterate boulders. So what did the developers decide to call these devastating sonic effects? Well, according to Wisdom Tree, they're not blasts, or sound waves, or anything more majestic and daring – they're toots. Yes, the mighty walls of Jericho were leveled... by toots. – AP

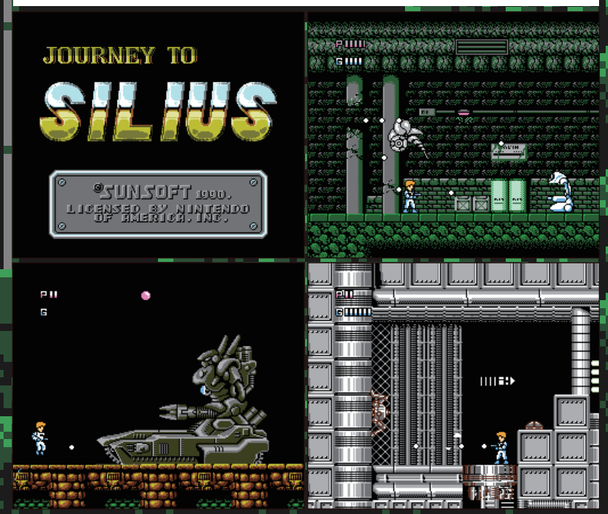


Journey to Silius

Genre: Run and Gun Shooter
Release Date: Sept. 1990
Developer: Tokai Engineering
Publisher: Sunsoft
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

A future space colony in the Silius Solar System has been attacked. As Jay McCray, son of the colony's murdered leader, you must defeat the terrorists. Run right, shoot sprites, and don't look back (the screen only scrolls forwards)! With just your life and ammunition meters at the top, the screen is uncluttered, providing a great view of the game's excellent backgrounds, sprites, and direction, accompanied by incredible music. The controls are responsive, allowing you to shoot while jumping or ducking and to change direction in mid-air. There are five stages, each ending with a mini-boss, such as a robotic tank or android, followed by a massive boss, such as a helicopter, giant tank, or spaceship. They have weak points (e.g., their eye or head) and attack patterns to learn and avoid. There's a variety of robot enemies, including turrets, various tanks, flying spheres, not-AT-STs, not-Xenomorphs, not-Terminators, and many more, alongside lasers, crushers, pitfalls, and one auto-scrolling level. Defeating each mini-boss garners a new weapon. Your default handgun has infinite ammunition while the others (a shotgun with a spread pattern, machine gun, homing missile, laser rifle, and grenade launcher) share one finite meter. Blue energy capsules restore two bars to your gun's energy meter, while rarer red capsules refill half an increment of your life, which isn't much; moreover, there are only three continues. This artificial difficulty may be off-putting for some players, and it's also rather short. Initially, it was developed as a Terminator game, hence all the machines, and the final game's story isn't that memorable - but if you love shootin' stuff, it doesn't need to be!

Reflections: I *literally* heard of this game in 2009 while browsing NES music on YouTube, where I found the *[rʌf] World* Famicom soundtrack (by Naoki Kodaka, the composer for other NES Sunsoft greats) and loved it. Years later, I realized it was Journey to Silius. Why Sunsoft decided upon a "sillier" title and a new redheaded hero design, I don't know. He was a masked commando in Japan. If they hadn't lost the recognizable *Terminator* license (it was noted as such in a *Nintendo Power* preview), this probably would've become a beloved classic– a subtle example of how story matters in gaming. – KN



Joust

Genre: Action
Release Date: Oct. 1988
Developer: Williams Electronics
Ported by: HAL Laboratory
Publisher: HAL America
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

In this faithful port of the arcade classic, players control an ostrich-riding knight flying around single-screen levels with rock platforms that can flown around or landed on. Players have to defeat the other knights on the stages by flying into them at a higher level than they are at. If they are bumped at the same height, the two ostriches will bounce off each other, and the player will lose a life if they are hit by an enemy higher up. Defeated riders will leave an egg that you can collect for points. When all are defeated, the next stage will begin. You can fly/hover around with the A button (single flap) or B button (continuous flaps). The flying controls take getting used to and you don't ever feel like you're totally in control, but that's all a part of the authentic ostrich-flying experience! The level of difficulty lies in the number of enemy riders facing you (it can be crowded), placement of platforms that may hinder you, and lava pits and stage hazards (giant birds and the giant hand!). Mileage may vary depending upon fondness of the original arcade title and not wearing out the simple but fun premise.

Reflections: I personally am not the biggest *Joust* fan, but you have to recognize the originality of the game at the time in the arcades, especially when the games mostly were space shooters and dozens of *Pac-Man* clones. But seriously, a flying ostrich?! – PC

The Jungle Book

Genre: Platformer
Release Date: Aug. 1994
Developer: Eurocom
Publisher: Virgin Interactive
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★

Jungle boy Mowgli must venture back to his village in this challenging platformer, based upon the Disney animated film. The objective in each nonlinear level is for Mowgli to collect a certain amount of gems in the allotted time (every few levels end with a boss fight). Mowgli can walk, run, jump, and grab, climb, and swing on vines as he traverses levels both horizontally and vertically. The animation on display is gorgeous, which services the license very well. Armed with bananas that are thrown horizontally, diagonally, or straight up, Mowgli must contend with jungle critters such as monkeys, porcupines, warthogs, fish, birds, snakes, and more. The music is nice here, with tunes from the classic film. Power-ups are plentiful and include several weapons with limited ammo that can be switched off via the Select button at will: double banana, boomerang, pea shooter, and a mask that grants invincibility. Nonweapon power-ups include extra lives, grapes to restore health, more time, and a shovel, that if collected, will grant the player a nifty timed bonus round after the level to collect more weapons, lives, and points. The challenge here is considerable due to the fact that some gems are in hard-to-reach areas (or somewhat hidden), which will require lots of searching and backtracking, especially when frustration sets in when only one gem is remaining and the player has overshot it. The vine grabbing/swinging mechanic works beautifully on free-hanging ones, but vines can be death-traps when they are stationary, as sometimes the player will seem to randomly short-jump a platform or the next vine, which can lead to falling to one's death. There are also many spots where picture-perfect jumping is required. Fortunately, there are many opportunities for extra lives, but only the most hardcore platformer will not burn through them. Everyone else may want to stay out of the jungle.

Reflections: This is a tough but beautiful-looking game. Most played this on the SNES and Genesis instead, or even the Game Boy. While the 16-bit versions of the game obviously had better graphics, even closer to matching the film, the NES version did a fine job in its own right, as one of the last NES games produced. – PC

Jurassic Park

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: June 1993
Developer: Ocean Software
Publisher: Ocean Software
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★⯪

In this top-down action game based upon the popular book and movie series, players must escape the overrun dinosaur island by completing objectives in each level, such as restoring power and stopping a triceratops stampede. Aggressive dinos can be dealt with using different ammo types like rockets or stun shots that vary in power and ability. They can either temporarily freeze or do real damage and destroy more aggressive species such as velociraptors and the dilophosaurus. On paper the game sounds fine, but in reality it is extremely repetitive. No matter what, the final objective of every rather large level boils down to hunting for an arbitrary number of eggs that grant you access to the final part of each stage. To make the game even more boring, players must hunt down a number of key cards in each level in order to open buildings and other areas that contain even more of the eggs. Graphics are colorful and nice for a late release NES title, but the assets and elements repeat too often. The music has a great chiptune sound, but even that is somewhat lazy, with the first stage theme being a direct rip-off of a tune from the Commodore 64 cult hit *Comic Bakery*. Despite these negatives, this is far better than the average movie licensed game. It'll be worth the time of fans of the film, but the game is still shy of something truly recommendable to anyone else.

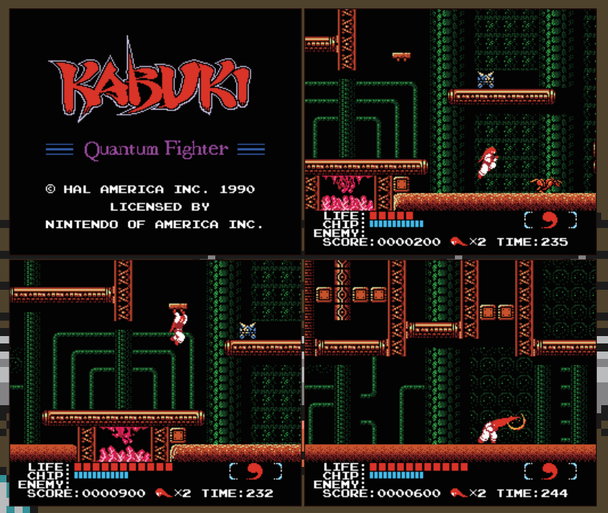
Reflections: I tend to dislike any game, new or old, that requires collecting an often large number of items to progress. It isn't really exploration if the player knows they will have to comb every inch of every level to complete an objective. At that point it's just another form of linearity, one that's drawn-out and frustrating. – IF

Kabuki Quantum Fighter

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Jan. 1991
Developer: Human Entertainment
Publisher: HAL America
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⯪

Enter a computer world as a Kabuki performer and attempt to stop a virus from controlling Earth's defenses. The game is a quick and snappy platformer with waves of creative cyberpunk and mutant-themed enemies to avoid. Truly, some of these enemies are quite terrifying, like heads that explode to expose guns, ninja frogs, and cybernetic hell hounds. The main attack at the player's disposal is a hair whip using the Kabuki's long red locks. An optional projectile attack, referred to as the energy gun, is selectable and consumes a currency called "chips" when used. This energy gun can be upgraded with significantly stronger additional shot types after beating most stage bosses. Level design is well-thought-out with some serious focus on platforming and jumping segments, including certain platforms that the Kabuki can hang from and use to swing to other platforms. Enemies, on the other hand, sometimes leave the player with the impression that they are receiving a few cheap, unavoidable hits. Graphically, the grimy cyber world is nailed perfectly, and the soundtrack is excellent and matches the theme just as well. While the gameplay is good, the unique main character and genuinely weird setting definitely make this a fun game to experience.

Reflections: This was one of those games I so desperately wanted based on nothing more than a few pages of magazine layout. I ended up finding it years later at a flea market, and while the game itself didn't exactly knock my socks off, I've always continued to find it to be one of the most interestingly designed settings for an NES game. – IF



Karate Champ

Genre: Fighting
Release Date: Nov. 1986
Developer: Technōs Japan
Ported by: Sakata SAS
Publisher: Data East
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★

This one-on-one fighting game consists of opponents attempting to score points by successfully striking with a punch or kick. In 30 second rounds, players will attempt to land attacks to earn half and full points, depending upon the move landed. Two full points wins a round, and two out of three rounds wins a match. Players have 10 punching and kicking attacks at their disposal, as well as jumping and a block by pressing away from the opponent. Pulling off specific moves is somewhat complicated though, as they are mapped to button combinations and directions on the D-pad, and they must be pressed precisely to do the proper move. The other complication is that these attacks are flipped to the opposite button when facing the opposite direction, since in general B attacks to the player's left, and A attacks to the right. Learning the moves and getting used to them is absolutely critical to standing a chance. What also must be learned is the range of each attack, since successfully landing moves requires being a precise distance away from the opponent for each specific attack. If an attack misses, this leaves the fighter open to a counter-attack. Also, players must watch out for accidentally performing maneuvers that will turn your back to your opponent, since you'll be required to turn yourself around again. There's a steep learning curve, but if you stick with it, you can learn at least to hold your own. If players win a match, they are treated to a bonus round, which is usually difficult due to the exact timing required, besides attempting to remember which button combination pulls off the proper move. It requires patience, but there's some enjoyment to be had with a solid port of the game that established the fighting genre.

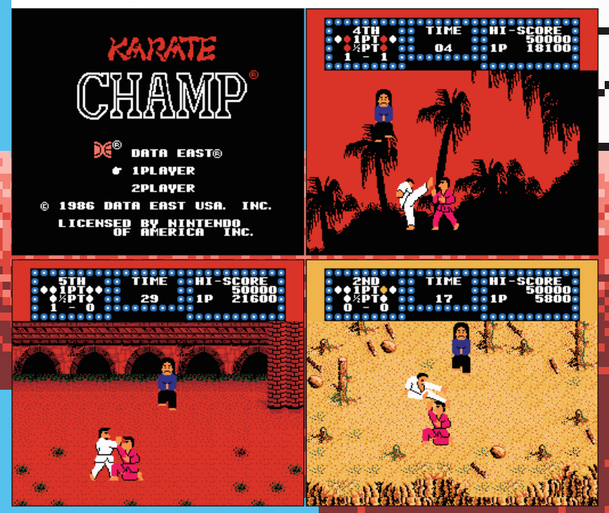
Reflections: In the arcade, *Karate Champ* was controlled with dual joysticks, which is undoubtedly easier to control. It's strange that that option wasn't included here for single-player action, with the player being able to use two controllers to emulate the arcade controls – a missed opportunity. My fondest memory of this game, though, has to be its cameo appearance in the martial arts movie *Bloodsport* (1988). In the great scene, Frank Dux (Jean-Claude Van Damme) comes across a burly biker fighter named Ray Jackson (Donald Gibb), who is playing on the arcade machine. Frank proceeds to play Ray at a spirited game and destroys him. A rich and fulfilling friendship develops between the two fighters from there. Did I mention that I love *Bloodsport*? Because I do. I should write a 400-page book about that amazing film next. – PC

The Karate Kid

Genre: Action, Fighting
Release Date: Nov. 1987
Developer: Atlus
Publisher: LJN
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

Based mostly on the second movie, with a slight nod to the first, this action title has Danny fighting it out in Okinawa in order to rescue Kumiko. The game starts with the final moments of the first movie, as Danny fights the Cobra Kai in a four round, one-on-one tournament. This segment is pretty easy to beat by mashing buttons and not relenting. From that point the game plays out as an action-platformer, jumping through villages and rainstorms while punching and kicking the fairly constant stream of enemies. Occasionally, players can enter buildings that trigger different bonus stages, such as the swinging hammer and catching flies with chopsticks, that can earn Danny limited use special moves. These mini-games are generally quite difficult and require precise timing and positioning that feels more like bad programming than purposeful difficulty. Controls are all around decent, but jumping with the directional pad can be a bit tricky. Some of the later game segments, like the wind in stage three or keeping a girl from drowning in stage four, can be more frustrating than necessary. The two-player mode is a fairly unexciting versus affair, and with a lack of moves it gets stale immediately. All in all, though, despite some fairly legitimate complaints, the game is still a pretty decent time.

Reflections: Every dog has their day and even LJN can release an enjoyable game. While *The Karate Kid* is far from perfect, its variety is unique and fun. Much of this is probably due to it having been developed by a very young Atlus, a company that still produces and publishes great games. It's one of the first two games I ever remember renting. – IF

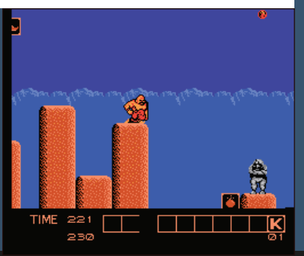


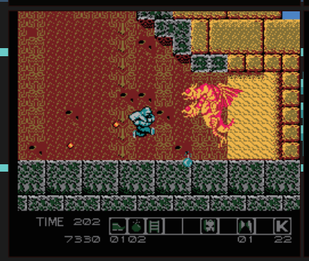
Karnov

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Jan. 1988
Developer: Data East
Ported by: Sakata SAS
Publisher: Data East
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⋆

In this arcade port, you're Karnov the fire-breathing Russian, searching for the Treasure of Babylon that was stolen by the dragon Ryu. This is a side-scroller with run and gun elements, except that you don't need guns when you can spit fire, and you don't really run, either. You walk slowly and shoot quickly, which is helpful since you only have two hit points and must proceed with caution. After taking damage, you turn blue, but finding a Super Fireball replenishes your health while also raising your firepower to a maximum of three projectiles at a time. You have a trio of lives and infinite continues (even though the manual claims you only have three), and collecting fifty "K" icons grants an extra life, making the game's difficulty somewhat more manageable. Helpful items called "Options" appear as icons you collect and are listed in a bar at the bottom of the screen. They're usually temporary and include a ladder, bombs that break certain walls, boots that improve your jump, and more. Some Options, such as the wings and swimming mask, only work at specific times. You select those listed in the bar by using the D-pad, so Karnov shuffles around unless you press pause first. There are nine stages, some with secret caches and alternate routes, adding variety. The rock men, flying demons, suits of armor, Speedo-clad musclemen, fish people, and other monsters are creatively designed, and bosses such as Tyrannosaurus rex, snake women, two-headed dragons, and others are original (yet recycled). The visuals are good, but the color palettes are often unappealing, and the action scrolls awkwardly, sliding the next area into place when you reach the screen's edge. Still, the aesthetic is interestingly weird, making this one memorable.

Reflections: As some gamers know, Karnov appeared in other Data East games, such as *Fighter's History* and *Trio The Punch - Never Forget Me* (What's that? Google it; you won't regret it). My first memory of Karnov is obscure: On a message board I frequented in the 2000s, someone posted NES songs and challenged everyone to guess them. The song from *Karnov* was among them, and although I couldn't identify it, I liked the music - although I didn't know it's the only tune throughout most of the game! Karnov still has fans, and if Bubsy can inexplicably get resurrected today, why not Karnov? – KN



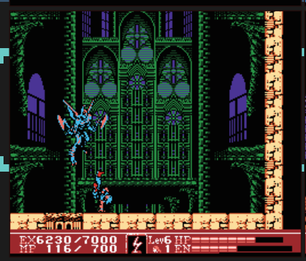


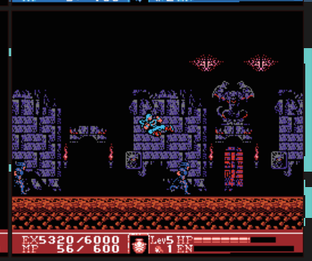
Kick Master

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Jan. 1992
Developer: KID
Publisher: Taito
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★⋆

Martial artist Thonolan must rescue the princess from an evil sorceress by kicking his way through eight stages of action. Players begin with four different kicking attacks, like a sweep, high kick, and a knee drop, and have to take out interesting enemies like knights, demons, winged creatures, zombies, and more. When enemies are defeated, they explode and three different power-up items are tossed into the air for the player to try and retrieve. These usually consist of coins (experience points), gems (points), and magic points. The experience points are used to level up Thonolan, which can occur up to seven increments. At each level, Thonolan will see an increase in his maximum life meter, magic points, and also learn a snazzy new kick to add to the repertoire, for example a sliding kick, flying kick, and a few kicking combos that can increase the damage incurred on enemies. Twelve different spells can be claimed throughout the areas of the game (some after boss fights, some picked up in stages) that the player can use via SELECT as long as there are enough magic points to use them. These include offensive attacks like lightning, defensive shields, and replenishing energy. The issue here is that the menu does not tell you which spell is which, so the player will have to memorize what each symbol is. Also, there aren't enough magic points available to really utilize the spells as much as you would like, so for the most part they have to be saved to replenish health or to assist in boss battles. Overall, the action is satisfying in utilizing the several kicking attacks. However, the platforming can be unforgiving in sections, and vertically scrolling areas can result in cheap deaths, since when the player falls down the screen will not scroll to follow. Graphically, the game is very pleasing, with varied, detailed backgrounds for the stages, and some nice kicking animations for Thonolan. Polish and shine are here, along with engaging boss battles, nice music, and good controls. However, the design could have been ironed a tad to increase the fun factor and lessen the frustration.

Reflections: We won't ask why Taekwondo exists in the fantasy land of Lowrel, but what a great concept to be using kicking and magic to take down knights and medieval monsters. Unfortunately, *Kick Master* disappoints gradually the more and more you play it. You're given these kick-ass spells (get it?), but they take so much magic points that you cannot really utilize them as a regular part of your repertoire. The max magic points is 999? Really? Good luck filling up to even half of that without being forced to utilize the Life Up spell to keep going, since the game is very stingy on giving out hearts. *Kick Master*, I like you, but I don't *like you* like you. – PC



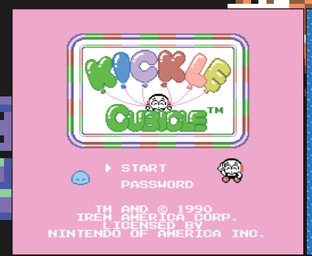


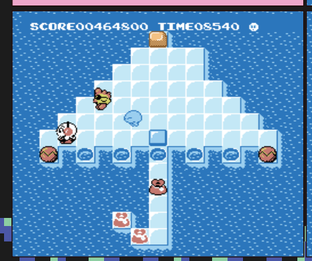
Kickle Cubicle

Genre: Action, Puzzle
Release Date: Sept. 1990
Developer: Irem
Publisher: Irem
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★

This charming and fun single-screen, overhead, action-puzzle game features an ice boy out to save the people of Fantasy Kingdom from the Wicked Wizard King . As the titular Kickle, the player has the ability to freeze enemies called Noggles into ice cubes, and then kick them into the water to create ice bridges to get at other, disconnected areas of the level. Kickle has to collect all the "dream bags" on each screen in order to move on. The puzzle mindset comes into play as the enemies start to move in patterns where the player cannot easily freeze and push them where they should go to create bridges. There is a solution, though, as Kickle can coax troublesome enemies to where he wants them to move by creating mini ice pillars to try and block them off and direct them elsewhere. The challenge ramps up fairly quickly, but the learning curve is appropriate and the fast action keeps things moving. Other, more challenging enemies will show up to be dealt with, including Max (who kicks ice cubes) and Sparky (who will run up to the player and explode). At the end of each of the four lands, Kickle will engage in an enemy boss battle. The graphics are well done with unique characters and enemies, and the music is fun and spirited. It's a nice, enjoyably charming puzzle game that will probably leave a smile on your face.

Reflections: *Kickle Cubicle* would easily make a "Top 10 Cutest NES Games" list if one existed. The protagonist wears ear muffs! That's cute, right? He may or may not be an albino, but that's another conversation entirely. The vegetable land that Kickle travels through seems to be promoting healthy eating, but all the stages have ice pops that you collect for bonus points. Mixed signals, Irem! – PC





Kid Icarus

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: July 1987
Developer: Nintendo R&D1, TOSE
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

In this uniquely designed adventure game full of loose Greek mythology references and diverse gameplay, players must take control of angel-winged Pit and rescue Palutena from Medusa, as they travel from the Underworld to The Palace in the Sky. The interesting hook to this game is the varied level design. Two of the worlds are vertical in nature, making Pit jump and climb ever higher in an attempt to reach the top of a level (walking off the screen wraps the player to the other side), while fending off enemies with a trusty bow and arrow. While health is represented by a bar, falling in these levels will result in an instant death. Hearts do not replenish the player's health, but rather are the currency of the game, used to purchase helpful items/weapons. The Overworld level turns the game into a side-scrolling platformer, which is a nice change of pace but ultimately not as interesting as the vertical levels. The final level, the Sky Palace, becomes a shooter in which Pit is constantly flying, firing laser-like shots and avoiding enemies from all sides in an approach to finish off Medusa. At the end of each world is a maze-like labyrinth, and this is where the game stumbles the most. These are very difficult, the bosses are blistering, and penalties for dying are severe. Beyond the level design, the enemies are also of particular note. While some could be interpreted as mythological creatures, such as the Gorgon-like red blobs with one eye, others, like flying noses, over-excited Grim Reapers, and falling feet are bewildering and lack explanation. The top example would be the Eggplant Wizard, an enemy in the labyrinths, that can turn Pit into an eggplant with legs who can't attack or do much of anything without a visit to the hospital. The game has a rather steep learning curve, but the rich and interesting world will likely be enough to keep players returning to Angel Land.

Reflections: This is one of the first games I truly remember being an obsession. I was so into it that my dad handed me his copy of Edith Hamilton's *Mythology with Daedalus* with "Icarus" bookmarked, and taught me how to search the index for other references like "Cerberus" and "Medusa." *Kid Icarus* was the catalyst for my lifelong interest in Greek Mythology. – IF

The only real experience I had playing this as a kid was when it was in an M-82 demonstration unit at the Lionel Kiddie City store. I thought it was very strange. I did not like the vertical scrolling of the first level, and the grim reapers disturbed me. I never felt a need to play it more after that. – PC

Kid Klown in Night Mayor World

Genre: Platformer
Release Date: Apr. 1993
Developer: Kemco
Publisher: Kemco
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★★

Kid Klown must save his family from the evil Night Mayor in this colorful platformer. As Kid Klown, the player must battle through five stages using versatile balloons as his weapon. Kid Klown can throw these balloons at enemies, place them on the ground and use them as a trampoline, or even hold one in the air as a parachute of sorts to float slowly down. The enemies are designed to coincide with the several different worlds in style, but most simply walk around or fire a simple projectile. Crates will appear in the stages that contain helpful items like hearts for health, extending the life bar, and invincibility. There are also collectible strawberry chips for the bonus stage attempts. These occur at the levels' ends and are cool third-person targeting mini-games where players have to shoot moving icons for power-ups and health-restoring hearts. Graphics are refined, colorful and bright, as are the very varied levels and associated enemies, which are different on every level. The enemy boss sprites are huge and the battles with them are engaging. Music is refined if not memorable. The game moves along at a good clip, while also being a little challenging and even having hidden bonus areas. Nice cutscenes that tell the story round out a technically impressive title. Even if you're scared of clowns, you shouldn't be fearful of playing this.

Reflections: *Kid Klown* was one of the last licensed games I garnered for my overly large NES collection. I always use it as an example of a game that is worth far less than what the internet and Ebay would have you believe. For over a year while I looked, all the available copies were held by a handful of sellers (some owning three or more copies), and they were all asking at least $40 on a BIN (Buy It Now) listing. Finally, an auction starting at $.99 came online, and I won the auction for $11 – quite a difference, right? Of course if that happened nowadays, one of the sellers owning the other copies for sale would bid up the auction cost to "protect the price" of the one(s) he was selling, because scumbags like that actually do exist. What was I saying? Oh yeah, *Kid Klown* – fun game! – PC

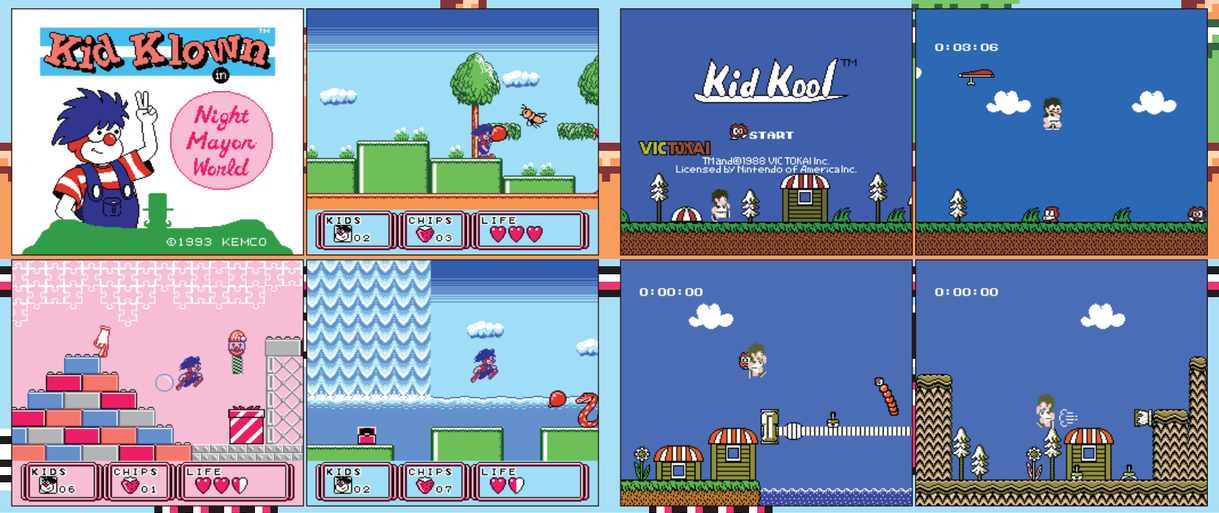
Kid Kool and the Quest for the Seven Wonder Herbs

Genre: Platformer
Release Date: Mar. 1990
Developer: Vic Tokai
Publisher: Vic Tokai
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★⋆

Attempt to collect seven herbs for the sick king in this colorful platformer. The key element here is the player's running momentum, which is extremely important to progress. Instead of a run button, Kool's speed is determined by how long he has been moving. Enemies may be jumped on, many requiring a second jump to drive them into the ground for good. Kool can occasionally find a fuzzball companion that can be thrown as an attack, and it will return to him if he doesn't pick it up himself. The graphics are plain but cute, and everything looks fine on paper, but the game requires crazy precision without giving the player precise maneuverability. Acceleration happens at an odd pace, making it easy to under or over jump platforms. A lack of mid-air control doesn't help matters. This becomes frustrating extremely quickly as many platforms are tiny. Some are only the width of Kool himself, and they are often over water or other dangerous obstacles. Things get worse with gusts of wind that can push players around and items that can take a minute off the timer. Add the messy controls with the inability to take one's time and get to know the levels, and the game boils down to trial, error, and memorization of the proper routes. Even if one finally manages to grasp the physics, there is no fun to be found in their mastery.

Reflections: While I doubt this title had any influence on Sonic Team, this momentum-based style of movement was implemented worlds better in their famous *Sonic the Hedgehog* series. *Kid Kool's* American box art is a hilarious attempt to sell this game based on the 1980s radical ideal: a kid making a fist decked out in aviator shades, a vest, and torn jeans. I bet a bunch of tubular fellows were upset to discover the actual character is a little doughy chap in white overalls. – IF

My friend Frank has completed this quest many times in his life without even realizing it. – PC



Kid Niki: Radical Ninja

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Nov. 1987
Developer: Irem
Ported by: TOSE
Publisher: Data East
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⋆

Princess Margo has been kidnapped by the Stone Wizard, and it's up to Kid Niki and his spinning sword to rescue her. The player battles across seven linear levels, all with a special boss character at the end. Along the way, ninjas, frogs, birds, and other menaces will harass the player. The simple gameplay is adequate for the most part, as it's mostly timing and being patient in taking out enemies. However, the one-hit deaths may be a little tough to deal with for some players, especially with bosses and when encountering areas where enemies will appear suddenly and pounce, requiring strict and disciplined movement. Visual/audio elements are very average, with the short and constantly looping tune becoming annoying after a while. It's fine to play, and there's some humorous character design (like our protagonist and his spiky hair), but this will probably not be a game one will want to return to that often.

Reflections: As a child, my major exposure to this game was through my classmate Tom, a problematic kid with a single parent, a divorced mother. Tom was somewhat violent and acted as a bully at times, but I somehow managed to befriend him. One afternoon, I was driven over to his house and we played a bunch of Nintendo games, including *Kid Niki*. Throughout the next handful of years, I would switch between being a friend of Tom's and sometimes an enemy, mostly due to his erratic personality. We even got into a couple of fights at school that he started for no real reason. It could have been a subconscious reaction that prevented me from really getting into this game later on throughout my life, but now that I've really played through it, I can honestly say that my aversion to the game was unfounded. It's not really a bad game, but it's nothing very special either. Oh well. Tom, if you're out there (and hopefully not in prison or a psych ward), I hope you're doing well. – PC

King Neptune's Adventure

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: 1990
Developer: Color Dreams
Publisher: Color Dreams
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Rare
★

As King Neptune the merman, players can swim around the sea on an adventure collecting eight treasures and destroying dastardly sea creatures such as crabs, starfish, and skeletons. Gameplay consists of throwing bouncing/deflecting lightning (A) and bubble bombs (B) while being able to freely float about the screen and its obstacles. Defeating enemies will result in sea-horses that can be collected (30 earns an extra life). The game is designed as being somewhat nonlinear with several areas to explore on a map that connects them and keys that must be found to unlock doors to other areas. The game's idea is nice, but all design elements are subpar, especially the poor, grating music. The challenge boomerangs wildly from easy to very difficult on a whim, and some gameplay elements will leave you scratching your head. Overall, it's somewhat too amateurish an effort to recommend.

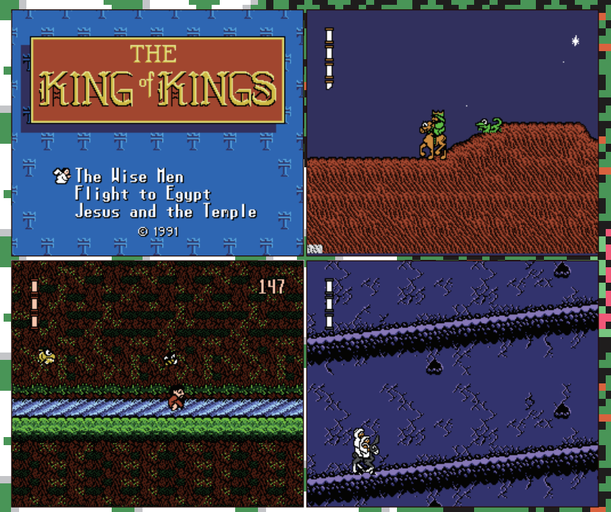
Reflections: I always confuse this game by title with *Mermaids of Atlantis*, which is a shame, since that puzzle game is at least a little fun. Color Dreams games all have the graphical look of a PC shareware game made in 1991. It's not that the graphical style is overtly terrible, but just from one look you can tell that it looks somewhat "foreign," as if it doesn't belong on the NES. – PC

King of Kings: The Early Years

Genre: Platformer, Compilation
Release Date: 1991
Developer: Wisdom Tree
Publisher: Wisdom Tree
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Uncommon
★

This Christian-themed title consists of three short, separate platforming games centered around the New Testament story of Jesus' early life. *The Wise Men* consists of one of the Magi traveling on a spitting camel to see the baby Jesus, avoiding enemies like vultures and scorpions in the desert along the way. *Flight to Egypt* has parents Mary and Joseph with baby Jesus traveling on a donkey (with a hind-leg kick attack) walking up a mountain road avoiding animals (goats, snakes, etc.), Roman soldiers, and falling rocks. *Jesus and the Temple* has Joseph (later Mary) platforming and avoiding pitfalls and animals on his way to finding the lost 12-year-old Jesus. This game in particular has poorly programmed sections, including an auto-scrolling waterfall one that is next-to-impossible to complete, as well as horizontally scrolling ones with falling spikes. Players can gain more energy during the levels of all three games by answering Bible questions correctly after picking up scroll icons. All three games are simplistic, semi-responsive, and feature floaty controls, inadequate hit detection, and no real reason to play them – neither fun nor religious based.

Reflections: Geez, someone really didn't want Joseph to find Jesus at the temple, with all the elaborate traps and spikes. I was raised a Catholic, went to Catholic school, and went to church every Sunday as a child. I still would have zero desire to play a Wisdom Tree game as a child had I known they existed. When I first saw this game, I got a little excited that *Jesus and the Temple* wasn't the tale of 12-year-old Jesus preaching, but rather the adult Jesus who kicked the crap out of the merchants in the temple using a flail. Think a *Castlevania* clone with Jesus as the main character! People would throw money at a game like that! It's not too late! Hire me, Wisdom Tree! – PC



King's Knight

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Sept. 1989
Developer: Workss
Publisher: Square
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

In this fantasy-themed, vertically scrolling shooter, players must guide four heroes (Ray Jack the Knight, Kaliva the Wizard, Barusa the Monster, and Toby the Thief) on a quest to slay a dragon and rescue Princess Claire. Each character has their own respective stage and their own strengths and weaknesses. For example, Ray Jack is the strongest offensively, while Barusa is the most durable. Each character has a life meter which can be replenished by collecting icons marked with an "Up" arrow. Conversely, icons with a "Down" arrow will reduce the player's life. Other power-ups include a "Spring" for increased jumping ability, a "Shoe" icon for speed, and a "Shield" for improved defense. Also of note are the "Element" icons, which enable the characters to cast spells, and the "Sword" icons which must be collected in order to defeat the dragon. These latter items are only of use in the fifth and final stage, which combines all four characters into one mobile unit with a shared life meter. Thus, the purpose of the first four stages is to build each character's strengths and abilities for the final battle, lending some light RPG elements to the gameplay. However, if even one of your characters dies during their preliminary stage, the final level is rendered unwinnable, which unquestionably adds to its difficulty. One unique aspect of the game is that almost everything on the screen, including trees, walls and cliffs, can be destroyed by the player, but unfortunately the act of clearing out obstacles can often leave you vulnerable to enemies. A mixed blessing which makes for a somewhat frustrating experience.

Reflections: *King's Knight* is a fairly original shooter with a flawed execution. While initially fun, the enjoyment wears thin once you realize that you only get one life per character, and that when you retry, you do not retain any of the abilities you've previously accumulated and must start all over again from scratch. I wanted to like this one, but in the end, the gameplay is simply too unbalanced for the average player. – JP

King's Quest V: Absence Makes the Heart Go Yonder!

Genre: Adventure
Release Date: June 1992
Developer: Sierra On-Line
Ported by: Novotrade International
Publisher: Konami
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★½

In this port of the best-selling adventure PC game, the player must guide King Graham of Daventry through the fairytale land of Serenia, braving dark forests, scorching deserts, and perilous seas to rescue his family from a wicked sorcerer named Mordack. The game features a third-person perspective and a point-and-click interface, with Graham's movements being controlled by the D-pad. Pressing SELECT brings up the menu bar, from which the player can choose to interact with characters and the environment by using an arrow to look, speak, take, or use an item by selecting the corresponding icon. Dialog and descriptions are displayed in text boxes. The M icon provides a password to continue the game at a later time. The player must collect many items throughout Serenia, each of which serves at least one purpose. Most of these can be deduced through common sense, but some may require more lateral thinking, or hints which can be learned by speaking with certain characters. Those characters may then reward Graham with another item in trade, or by promising to aid him in the future. This becomes invaluable later on, for example when a mouse that Graham rescues from a cat returns to help him at a critical time of need. Although Graham travels with a talking owl named Cedric, he ironically proves to be far less helpful than the other animals Graham encounters, and contributes almost nothing to the plot. Despite the graphics being downgraded and redrawn, everything is very nicely detailed, and the music and sound are fairly accurate as well. All of this makes for an enjoyable port of a true DOS classic.

Reflections: The very first graphic adventure game I had ever played, *King's Quest V* was one of the most defining games of my childhood. Created by Sierra co-founders Ken and Roberta Williams, I immediately fell in love with their whimsical fantasy world, and while I've played many other adventure games since, few of them have even come close to capturing the wonder of this one.

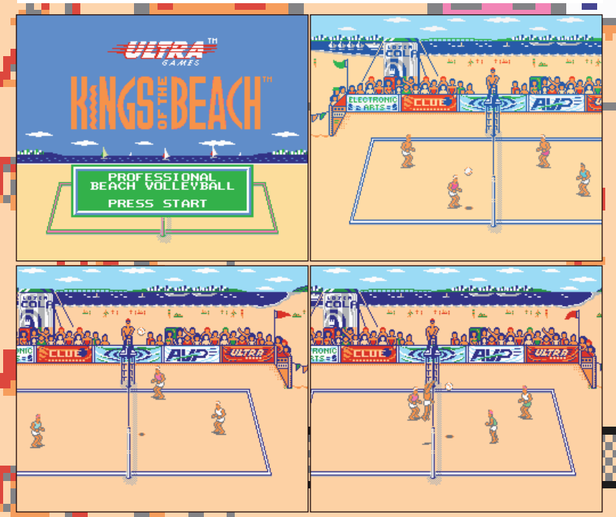
That said, the NES game is a well done port of the original. There were a few minor changes to the game, mostly in the dialogue, which had to be altered to meet Nintendo's strict code of censorship. It also removes some of the "unwinnable" situations and cheap deaths present in the original DOS version, thus making the game slightly easier. Definitely worth a play for veterans and newcomers alike. – JP

Kings of the Beach

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Jan. 1990
Developer: Electronic Arts
Ported by: Konami
Publisher: Ultra Games
Players: 1-4 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save, NES Four Score / Satellite compatible
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

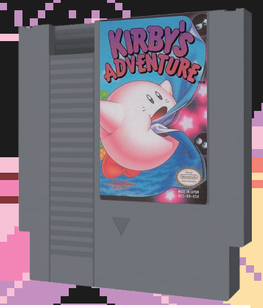
This two-on-two beach volleyball game has the player take control of a team of real players: Sinjin Smith and Randy Stoklos. The different game modes include a single game against the computer or against other players (up to four), a practice mode, and a world tournament where one or two players can face a dozen or so teams on the way to the championship. On the beach, the player (surprisingly) controls only one of the two on the team. Players will have to maneuver towards the oncoming ball, but at a certain point it will be done automatically, leaving the player to manage the timing of the ball strike – bumping, setting, and spiking. Gameplay is surprisingly deep, though. Besides having the ability to do three different serves, players can set the ball either on a shorter or higher-arc pass to evade defenders and have the ability to do one of two spikes: a powerful drive or a softer finesse one over a jumping defender. On defense, players will dive automatically for balls if close enough, and can jump and perform one of two spike-blocking attempts: a safer two-handed block or a riskier but more powerful one-handed attempt. The spot-on controls allow the specific timing involved to accomplish these actions to be enjoyable. The strategy involved in defending and setting up and hitting more open spikes is what drives the gameplay and is more engaging than it appears at first glance. The beach action is accentuated by very good animation, even if the graphic detail comes up a bit short. Other nice touches include characters from other Ultra games *Skate or Die!* and *Ski or Die* showing up to play, and there's even the ability to argue with the ref over a close call!

Reflections: This game sort of gets lost in the shuffle a bit due to its beach volleyball four-player rival *Super Spike V'Ball*. While that title features very good graphics and more of a fun, arcade feel, it lacks a bit of the complexity of the beach volleyball sport that this title conveys rather well. At first, it seems a bit strange not having total control of your teammate's movement, but I think that trade-off is worth it, as it allows you to concentrate more on thinking about the shot strategy and placement as you're setting up a spike. Both titles are very good games, but for different reasons, depending on your gameplay style preference. – PC



Kirby's Adventure

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: May 1993
Developer: HAL Laboratory
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★★



The pink puffball stars in a large, cheerful platformer that would be one of the last big hurrahs on the NES. Kirby progresses through worlds not only by running and jumping but also by filling himself with air and flying in a bouncy cloud-like state. He can inhale enemies and spit them as projectiles or swallow many of them to gain their abilities, from fire breath to UFO transformations. Larger enemies also exist as mid-bosses through many of the levels. These enemies require a more thought-out strategy and pattern recognition in defeating them, but players are rewarded with greater abilities, such as the power to perform wrestling suplexes or wipe out all the enemies on screen with Kirby's questionable singing and guitar playing skills. In between levels, a number of fun mini-games become available on the map screen, such as quick draw shootouts and crane games that can award players with extra lives. All of these mini-games are fun and serve as cute little diversions between full levels. This title really shows off the NES's full capabilities and is smooth, gorgeous, and features many memorable moments. The story is very simple but is told without words and has one of the best finales and final boss fights on the NES. Graphics are bright and happy: the tropical water looks inviting, the ice sends a chill, and the towering castles, which have some amazing scrolling effects, are sufficiently daunting. The music is almost always uplifting and extremely catchy. It isn't going to offer much of a challenge, but that makes this excellent title accessible to everyone. It's an absolute joy to play and is one of the brightest gems to come out of the NES's twilight years.

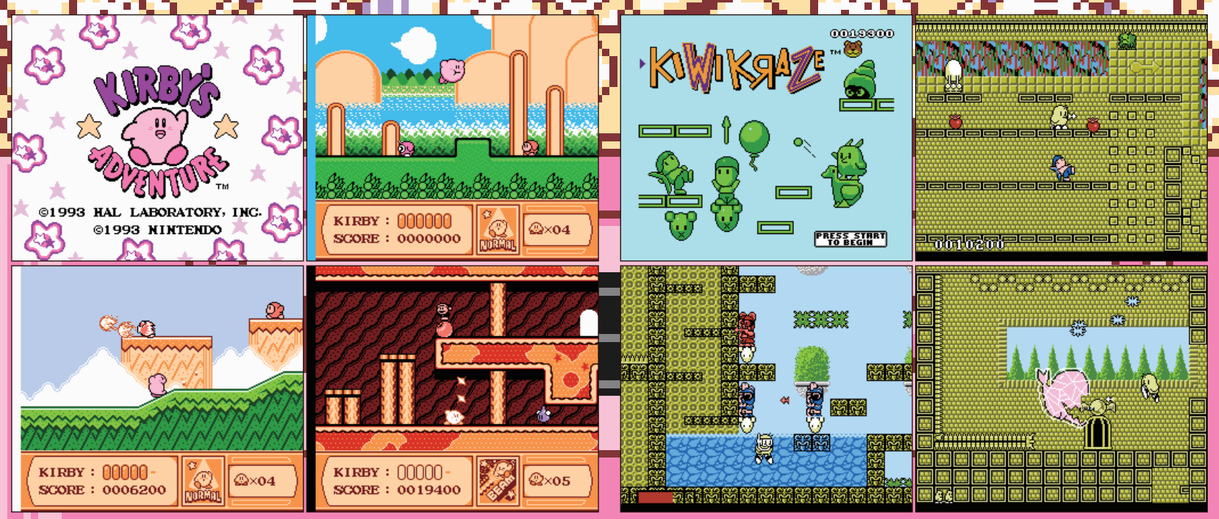
Reflections: While it wasn't quite the last release, this came out two years into the SNES's life and therefore was overlooked by nearly everyone. Those of us who didn't pass it up found a wonderful parting gift from the NES, a system that had provided so many of us with years of memories. This is still my favorite Kirby game followed very closely by the original *Kirby's Dreamland* on Gameboy. – IF

Kiwi Kraze

The NewZealand Story *(PAL)*
Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Mar. 1991
Developer: Taito
Ported by: Software Creations
Publisher: Taito
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★⋆

Like most kiwis, Tiki is normally a jaunty, joyful bird. But today, Tiki is on a mission of vengeance! The nefarious Wally Walrus has kidnapped all of Tiki's pals, including his girlfriend, Phee-Phee. Armed with his trusty bow and arrows, the courageous kiwi sets out to rescue his abducted companions in this adorable arcade port of *The NewZealand Story* (1988). Help Tiki make his way through the country, where he will jump, swim, and ride balloons. There are five distinct areas to conquer, so surviving this quest won't be quick or easy, and the heroic bird only has three lives and three continues to achieve victory. Thank goodness there's a heap of weapons and magical items to aid Tiki on his dangerous adventure. Swap Tiki's default bow for powerful bombs or the mighty laser gun! Yellow Kiwi dolls can be gathered to earn extra lives, and the Magic Staff grants temporary invincibility. The fiendish Wally Walrus commands a colorful cadre of baddies who seem to have a taste for fresh kiwi, but the resourceful bird has a few tricks up his sleeve. Have him jump into water and swim through sections of each level (minding his air meter), or get him to hop on a balloon and rise to higher ground. As it turns out, this crafty kiwi is anything but flightless - simply blast a foe from its balloon and poach it for Tiki! Bear-shaped balloons are slow, red balloons are impervious to spikes, and emu-shaped balloons are speedy. Each level ends with Tiki rescuing a caged pal before moving onto the next round. Tiki will journey over icy mountains and through a perilous pirate ship, all in the name of love! The main tune played throughout the game is catchy, but it can quickly become repetitive - you'll certainly be looking forward to that awesomely tense boss music. The graphics aren't impressive, but they work well in service to the fluid and fun gameplay.

Reflections: The following are some facts about real-life kiwis that I thought you might enjoy. Proportionally, kiwis lay the largest eggs of any other bird on earth. Kiwis cannot fly, and they have very poor eyesight, so it should come as a relief that they cannot wield bows and arrows. Also, they are never equipped with bombs. Kiwis are not able to hitch rides on floating balloons. Kiwis do not usually wear sneakers (although this last one would be rather adorable). – DM



KlashBall

Genre: Sports, Action
Release Date: July 1991
Developer: The Bitmap Brothers
Ported by: SOFEL
Publisher: SOFEL
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★⋆

This sports title features two teams of four armored players and a goalie guarding a goal. Overhead gameplay takes place on a futuristic court and is a combination of soccer and handball, whereby the object is to advance the ball either by passing or running it and throwing it past the opponent's goalie into a goal to score. Obstacles such as bumpers and pits can cause havoc during the game, and power-ups randomly available to collect on the court can put teams at an advantage for a limited amount of time. Gameplay is quick and frantic. The quick-sliding move on offense is helpful to advance the ball and get past defenders, and body checking is useful to gain possession of the ball on defense. The different teams have different speed, power, and skill stats. However, the play is too erratic to form any coherent game strategy to utilize or recognize during playing. Two different gaming modes are available. Knockout mode consists of playing each team one at a time, and League is a round-robin tournament mode where the teams all play each other, with the two best teams then meeting in the finals. While some elements of the game are interesting, the actual sports action isn't engaging or complex enough to warrant much play time.

Reflections: Let's get something straight: I'm a big fan of sports games and am pretty good at them. I've beaten *Tecmo Bowl* many a time, and have put more hours into *Baseball Stars* than any normal human should. That said, it took me roughly nine *KlashBall* games before I managed to eke out a victory. This isn't why I scored the game lower than average, but more an indication of the difficult and haphazard gameplay that you encounter while playing.

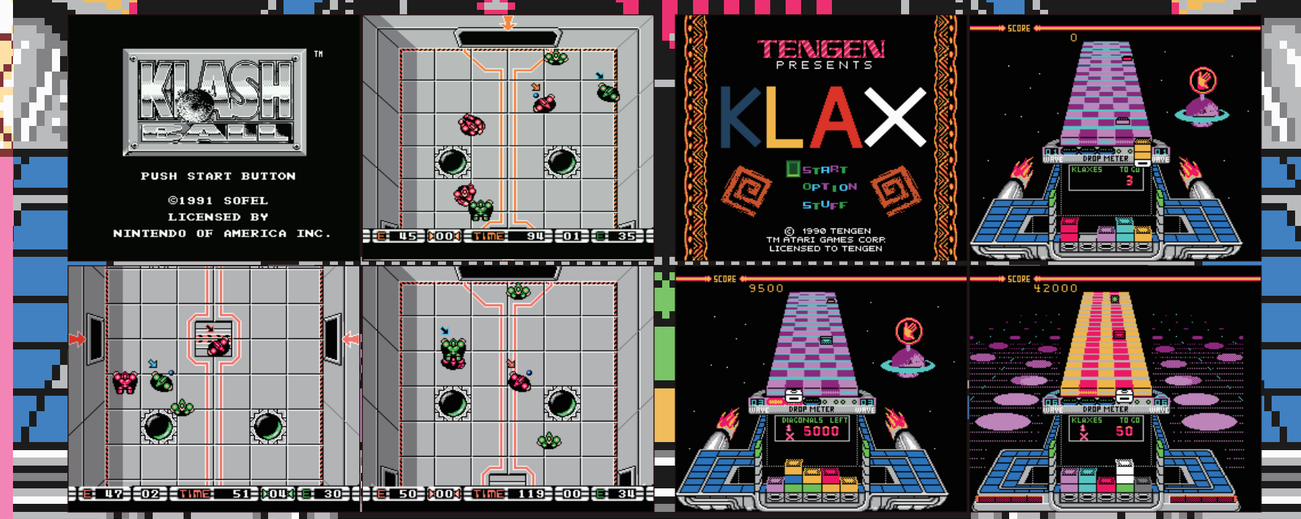
Sports games with armored players certainly don't have a good record. *Bill Laimbeer's Combat Basketball* on the SNES isn't exactly lauded either. Does *Base Wars* count? They're not armored humans, but armored robots. Hmmm, can I get judgment here? – PC

Klax

Genre: Puzzle
Release Date: 1990
Developer: Atari Games
Ported by: Tengen
Publisher: Tengen
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★⋆

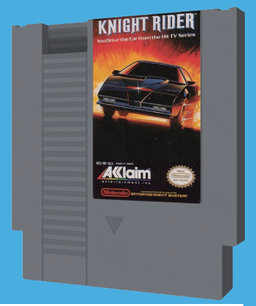
The object of this puzzle game is to stack different colored blocks, lining up three of the same color either vertically, diagonally, or horizontally (called a "Klax") on a five-by-five space to eliminate them for points. The blocks come towards the player's block mover from the background on a conveyor belt. The player must use the mover device at the end of the conveyor belt to catch the blocks and either drop them, push them back up the conveyor belt, or stack them on the device itself (up to five can be stacked). Each stage has a specific amount and type of Klaxes that must be completed to move on to the next level. The game ends when the player exceeds the amount of "drops" allowed (when blocks fall without being placed by the device) or when the playing area tank gets filled by blocks. It's an interesting puzzle game and definitely one that requires both fast reflexes and strategy. The difficulty curve may be too much for some players, though. Some style and a decent amount of options and extras round out a solid puzzle game.

Reflections: As a *Klax* player, I am mediocre at best. That doesn't mean I cannot recognize the game for its uniqueness and flair. The tagline "It is the nineties and there is time for Klax" is both an awkward and strange marketing ploy. When I think of the '90s, I think of alternative music, Ross Perot, and the show *Friends*. A mostly forgotten, but clever puzzle game usually doesn't spring to mind. – PC



Knight Rider

Genre: Racing, Action
Release Date: Dec. 1989
Developer: Pack-In-Video
Publisher: Acclaim Entertainment
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★



Hop into the seat of the Knight Industries Two Thousand - or KITT, for short - and chase down the bad guys in this driving action game based on the popular television series from the 1980s. There's some story here, but the focus is on the in-the-car experience. Driving KITT is easy, with acceleration and braking handled by pressing up or down on the D-pad, respectively. Steering is simple and responsive, too, and yes - there is a turbo boost button for jumping KITT over vehicles in the way. Two modes of play await Michael Knight wannabes: Drive Mode and Mission Mode. Drive Mode is a race against the clock to reach the next destination, while Mission Mode adds aggressive enemies and a boss battle at the end of each stage. Drive Mode is simpler in concept but by no means easy, as drivers must avoid collisions with other vehicles and items on each side of the road while keeping an eye on the time remaining and the fuel gauge. In Mission Mode, KITT's weaponry becomes available to fight off enemy vehicles. KITT starts with a basic machine gun, and missile and laser gun power-ups and upgrades can be had as the game progresses. Other power-ups, which add time, fuel, or repair KITT's damage, can also be picked up in each stage. Grabbing these is critical to making it to the awaiting boss battle before time, fuel, or shields run out. The game looks nice, with noticeable scenery to indicate each destination city and smooth animation through each stage. Enemy and civilian cars don't differ much, but this is okay; pre- and post-stage cutscenes look good, too. The sound is acceptable, but the missing TV theme song is disappointing. Overall, this is a challenging but fun ride that's worth taking.

Reflections: *Knight Rider* and *Rad Racer* share a few similarities, including the tendency of drone cars to intentionally steer into your line of travel. It's more annoying here because you're not just worried about avoiding collisions and staying on the road; you also have enemy cars shooting at you while you're trying to steer clear of these jerks. Of course, in this game, you can just turbo boost over traffic. More cars should have this feature in reality. Or at least, mine should. WHOOOSH. – PS

Krazy Kreatures

Genre: Puzzle, Action
Release Date: 1990
Developer: Bitmasters
Publisher: American Video Entertainment
Players: 1–2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★⋆

Does a puzzle game need a backstory? This one has you assume the role of an "intergalactic immigration officer." That's certainly different. A crazy (sorry, "krazy") assortment of creatures (sorry, "kreatures") from around the universe is gathering, and it's your job to arrange these silly icons into matching rows to remove them from the playfield. If you're not quick enough, the screen fills up and the game is over! It sounds simple, but this is a fun title that's fast-paced and just nuanced enough to stay entertaining for surprising lengths of time. At the outset, choose from single-player, two-player co-op, or two-player competitive modes. Once you begin, the screen is peppered with kreatures as you try to match them up as efficiently as possible with a cursor. You need a specific number of matches to complete each wave. Once that number is reached, new kreatures stop accumulating, and you're given a countdown clock, prompting you to remove as many of the existing kreatures as you can before time runs out. Kreatures can be sorted into vertical, horizontal or diagonal lines, with a requirement of three to six matching pieces in succession, depending on the specific kreatures in play. The goofy pieces are divided into four categories: "animals" such as cats and elephants, "things" such as chattering teeth and books, "humanoids" such as Larryface and Spinner, and "monsters" such as Fishface and Glowskull. Precious question mark icons can be used to fill in gaps on the fly. No music accompanies this madness. It's just you, some basic bloops and bleeps, and plenty of wacky yet engaging puzzle solving. The difficulty ramps up steadily as you progress, with the action getting quicker and the screen layouts becoming increasingly trickier. You may be loony, cuckoo, insane... bonkers, even! But are you KRAZY enough to make it through all 32 levels?

Reflections: My gripe here is simple: How do you name a game "*Krazy Kreatures*" and then NOT have the idea to only include animals with "K" names? Koala, Kangaroo, Kestrel, Kiwi, Killer Whale, Kite, Katydid, Komodo Dragon, Kookaburra, Kinkajou, and Kraken! A kuality kollection of kolorful "K" kritters! Isn't that a kute koncept? – DM

There are two goofy things about this game that I adore: the green circular goblin guy on the title screen who eats the game choice selected, and the credits boxes that are brought into the screen via attached rocket packs. – PC

The Krion Conquest

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Jan. 1991
Developer: Vic Tokai
Publisher: Vic Tokai
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★⋆

Francesca the witch has to rid the land of the evil Krion Empire in this fast-paced action-platformer. The game world is aesthetically pleasing and the cutesy squashed anime characters add charm to the package. The levels push the player's dexterity by them taking on a plethora of generic robot baddies such as spring coils, helicopter bots and an assortment of nefarious ne'er do wells. Each of the five levels consists of three separate sub-stages, and if you die, then it is back to the sub-stage start. Complete the sub-stages and it is on to a boss battle. There are no checkpoints throughout, but the player does have a generous health bar and enemies occasionally drop power-ups. There are no continues either (just the standard three lives), so memorization of stages and their inhabitants is absolutely necessary. The controls are awkward at times as Francesca can have trouble performing the simplest of jump shots, hindering any fluid action. Getting hit by an enemy stuns just long enough for another robo nasty to fly in and attack further. But Francesca can fire up and duck which really comes in handy later in the game. From the pause menu, a slew of selectable weapon types are available to assist from the get go: shields to freeze rays to very handy wall bounce projectiles, and using each one at the right time really helps progression. With a hold of the B button, the player can also charge shots for increased damage output. Weapons all have unlimited use so the fun is in experimenting with which work best. Another interesting feature is the broomstick which can be selected to traverse across spike pits and those hard to reach areas, but can be awkward to use as Francesca can't jump while using it. A pumping soundtrack accompanies the witch hero along the way. This solid game offers a huge challenge, which may make it inaccessible to many due to its sheer difficulty, lack of continues, and unpolished controls.

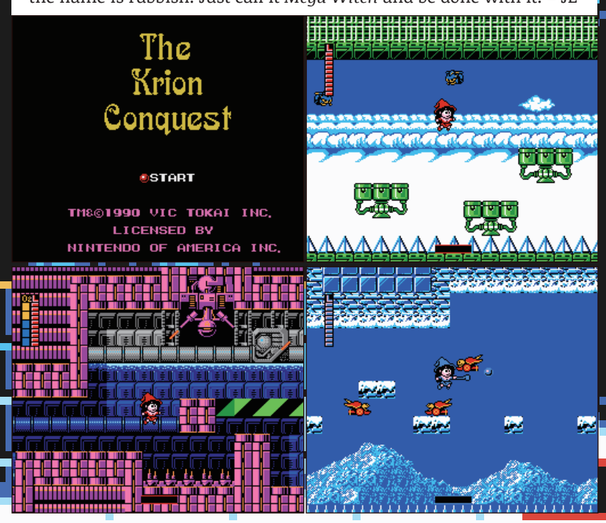
Reflections: Let's address the elephant in the room: the game is a *Mega Man* clone. From the slick presentation, soundtrack, character design, and selectable weapons – it is plain to see. Why make yet another humdrum platformer when you can copy one of the best? The broom is neat, but the number of times I tried to jump off it only to fall to my doom was eye-poppingly painful. The lack of character progression (Francesca has all weapons at the start) is a drag but the game is giving you all the tools to get on with it, almost teasing you to try and beat this difficult challenge. However, if you design a game that is seriously difficult, at least have the courtesy of giving the player some continues or at worst a password system. Oh, and the name is rubbish. Just call it *Mega Witch* and be done with it. – JE

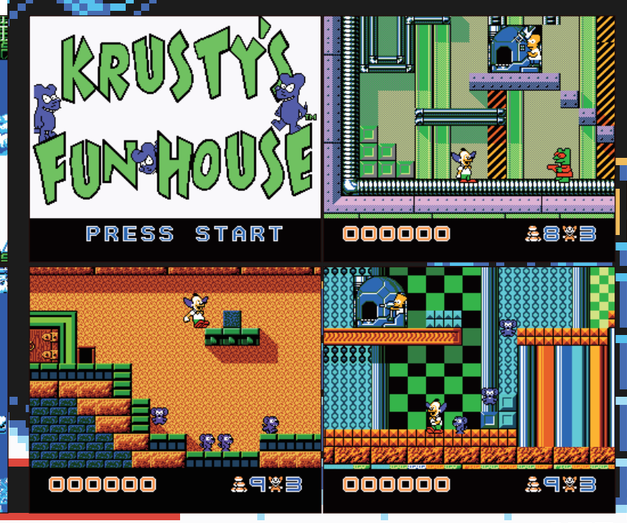
Krusty's Fun House

Genre: Puzzle
Release Date: Sept. 1992
Developer: Audiogenic Software
Publisher: Acclaim Entertainment
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★⋆

Krusty the Clown (from the cartoon *The Simpsons*) finds his Fun House overrun with rats, so with the help of fellow Springfield residents, he must puzzle out how to get rid of the vermin. He begins in an area with doorways that become available one at a time. Within each is about a dozen more doors leading to individual levels that are playable in any order, minus the locked one, which must be last. The stages themselves consist of a screen of platforms, pipes, and other obstacles that prevent the rats from making their way to the machines of their doom. They move in a set pattern, walking in a straight line, and are able to climb the height of a single block. It's Krusty's job to move objects, such as various blocks, pipes, and fans, to manipulate where the rats go. In addition to figuring out the correct path, the protagonist clown also has to watch out for aliens, flying pigs, and other enemies that wander the level. He can attack them with weapons he finds in magic blocks, which also hold other items, including extra lives. When all the rats have been exterminated in the machines, Krusty can exit the stage from the door. If he gets stuck, however, SELECT sends him outside the level at the cost of a life, tracked in the lower right. After completing a section, a password is given. This is an entertaining puzzle game with new mechanics introduced periodically. Each section presents a different visual theme (e.g., industrial or outdoors) as well as new background music. The controls are tight, which is necessary considering some of the required maneuvers, like simultaneously picking up and jumping off of a block. It's a well-done game that has the added bonus of using beloved cartoon characters!

Reflections: I adore the presentation of this title! It somehow made Krusty, who creeped me out as a child, seem cute, from the way he lifts his legs when he jumps to his purple, bouncing hair as he walks. The mechanics seem simple, but the levels are designed so that it doesn't feel like you're solving the same puzzle ad nauseum. However, I did admittedly find there to be too many levels to maintain a high fun factor. That's not to say I didn't enjoy it, but there can only be so many different ways to trap rats in jars. – KY



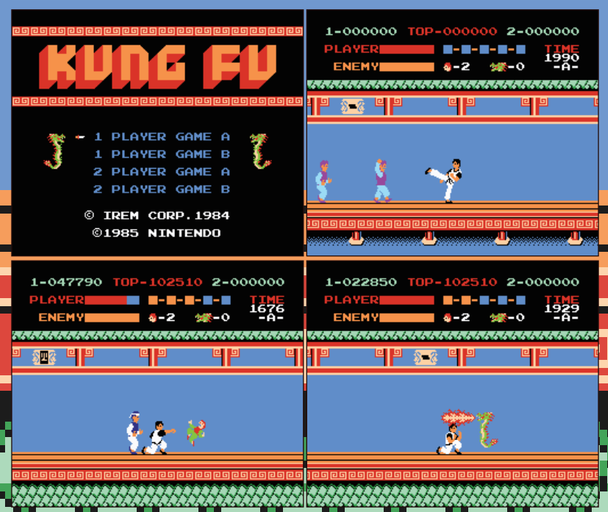


Kung Fu

Genre: Beat 'em Up
Release Date: Oct. 1985
Developer: Irem
Ported by: Nintendo
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★★½

Thomas must battle through five side-scrolling stages of the Devil's Temple to face Mr. X and save Sylvia in this progenitor of the beat 'em up genre. Thomas travels alternately left and right, every other level, battling enemies with a simple punch, kick, crouching punch, crouching kick, jumping punch, and jump kick. In short, timed levels, players must take out Grippers (who will hug players and deplete their health), Knife Throwers (who take two hits to defeat), and Tom Toms, miniature Thomas lookalikes who can grip the player as well as somersault onto them when the player kneels. The second stage also features dragon and snake traps to contend with, and the fourth has poisonous killer moths. Players have a health bar, but that can drain quicker than you think. Each level nicely ends with a short boss battle with Stick Fighter, Boomerang Fighter, Giant, Black Magician, and finally Mr. X, who can not only block attacks, but whose health replenishes. After saving Sylvia, the game will restart at a higher difficulty. While short, the experience is surprisingly sharp, requiring quick reflexes and efficient movement to make it through, as enemies will constantly come after the player from left and right. Nice sound effects accentuate the action and tight controls. It's perfect for a short blast of martial arts fun, for speed-running, or for just getting a taste of the excellent foundation of the beat 'em up genre.

Reflections: An arcade port of Irem's *Kung-Fu Master* (1984), the NES port to me is superior. The arcade version has better graphics, but the controls are stiffer, and there's a much smaller portion of the screen that can be viewed, making it seem a bit crowded. The laugh of the bosses after defeating Thomas is one of my all-time favorite NES sounds, and the laugh of the magician sounds very similar to Ganon's in *Zelda II* at the game over screen. The Giant boss looks a lot like Michael Clarke Duncan (may he rest in peace). I'll never forget the first time I played this, which was also the first time I played the NES. I had dinner at my friend Kevin's, and in his nice finished basement we gamed on an old console television with its built-in wooden entertainment center. At the wet bar, Kevin and I dined like kings on steak, mashed potatoes, and green peas (I can still taste the A.1. Sauce). *Kung Fu* remained paused on the TV, and we couldn't wait to get back to it. It was that night in the Fall of 1987 that I decided I wanted an NES, which I would receive that Christmas. So I guess you can partially thank *Kung Fu* for this book existing, or maybe a combination of green peas, mashed potatoes, and steak sauce. – PC



Kung-Fu Heroes

Genre: Action
Release Date: Mar. 1988
Developer: Culture Brain
Publisher: Culture Brain
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

Looks like the bad guys are having a great day so far - the insidious villains have not only stolen the 10 treasures of the kingdom, but they've also kidnapped poor Princess Min-Min. Enter Kung-Fu masters Jacky and Lee! The valiant heroes must punch and kick their way through eight enemy castles in this offbeat action game for one or two players. Every castle contains four top-down rooms, each of which must be bested by defeating a set amount of enemies. Evildoers including Dragon Man and Mr. Coffin pursue the duo, so Jacky and Lee must collect countless power-ups to aid them against their vicious foes. Among these, the mirror reflects enemy projectiles, and the sword is required for defeating certain baddies. Obtaining five money bags awards the heroes with an E(xtra) Ball, which can be amassed in batches of five for extra lives. Jacky and Lee punch stones and bricks to find hidden power-ups along the way. The menu at the top of the screen displays money bags, E Balls, and items gathered, along with remaining lives and other vital stats. The "K" in the menu represents the legendary "Miracle Kick," a powerful fighting technique practiced by the heroic warriors. There are only a handful of level tracks forming the musical backdrop to the action, making the game sound pretty bland. However, the heroes continuously shout as they fight, which is a lot of fun. It's also interesting that Jacky and Lee need to punch in order to pick up power-ups, as opposed to the common video game model of grabbing items by simply walking over them. Furthermore, the tentative hit detection can make this title feel a tiny bit broken at times. If that aspect of the game were improved, Jacky and Lee would have been everyone's heroes.

Reflections: Jacky and Lee seem like a couple of nice kids, but isn't it a little presumptuous for our playable protagonists to label themselves as "Heroes" right from the beginning of the game? They haven't even accomplished anything yet! Of course, the highly skilled pair of martial arts warriors can flip, punch, and kick with the best of 'em. BUT they need to endure eight perilous castles in order to actually save the princess. Only after they are victorious can Jacky and Lee claim the lofty moniker of "Heroes." Until then, I think the title "Kung-Fu Hopefuls" is much more appropriate. – DM

L'Empereur

Genre: Strategy, Simulation
Release Date: Nov. 1991
Developer: Koei
Publisher: Koei
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★★

Four scenarios from Napoleon's beginnings to his Glorious Empire days await in this historical strategy war simulation. The main map screen of Europe is where the introduction to each turn plays out. Territories are marked by which country flag occupies them, with the overarching task being to unify the land under La Tricolore. The computer plays out actions at the bottom of the screen between AI opponents before it's France's turn. On the city screen, a plethora of options are available to the player. From invading another city, investing in armies, taxing the citizens, to offering treaties and resting troops, it is all quite daunting at first, but can be learned with patience. Finding that perfect balance is the key between victory or utter defeat, which is a constant challenge. The battles are divided into two scenarios in land and sea (if the city being invaded is by the coast). Players must be wary choosing a sea battle, as the game tries to have some sense of historical accuracy, with the British navy being a powerhouse when compared to the French, for example. Choosing army size is next, with the game allotting a total of commanders that can be used on the battlefield. Each commander has his own number of troops, but players must be careful in sending a huge battalion, as this will leave other areas of the map vulnerable during the skirmish as well as deplete food reserves. The combat screen is divided up into squares that three unit types fight on (infantry, cavalry and cannon), taking turns fighting until either side wins – or starves to death! The downside here is there are little to no animations, as unit tiles bump each other and numbers change, with no visible action. An interesting feature is being able to choose each scenario or watch the computer play, which gives a flavor of the proceedings. The only downside is the occasional control issue, which can easily lead to pressing the wrong button at the worst possible time, resulting in a ridiculous faux pas. It's a super complex strategy game, but not for the casual gamer or fledgling strategist. It's not the prettiest either, but when the depth and longevity suck you in, it really doesn't matter.

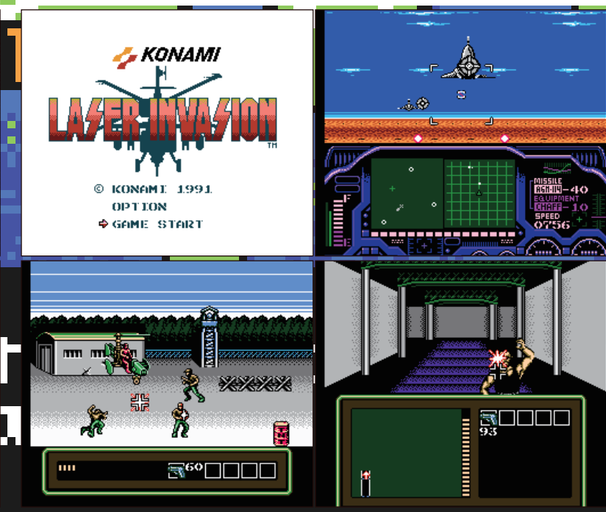
Reflections: It always feels tense when the message bar states that another country is "plotting strategy." This usually means a butt-kicking is coming your way, but what's that? My troops are on the other side of the map fighting and I've left a massive gap, just begging for it to be taken advantage of? Well that was five hours well spent! These are the follies and trials that come with Koei games. It's so engrossing that even if you mess up after 10 hours, that realization to change tack and focus on farming and trade deals instead of all out warmongering can reap rewards instead. I'm not sure what's more impressive, the amount of content squeezed into a little gray cart, or the amount of depth on offer. – JE

Laser Invasion

Genre: Shooter, Action
Release Date: June 1991
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Konami
Players: 1
Special Features: Zapper (optional)
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

Sheik Toxic Moron is preparing to launch the ridiculously deadly TechnoScorch Missile, so the military sends you to take him down in this multifaceted shooter. You are tasked with piloting the Laser Invasion Helijet, firing on foes from a cockpit perspective, as well as with enduring first-person rail shooter assaults and navigating 3D mazes. Each of the game modes displays the current scene in the main window, with information such as ammo or a map at the bottom. The D-pad is primarily used for controlling motion, while in the rail shooter sections and enemy ambush maze screens, it moves the crosshairs. Alternatively, you can use the NES Zapper or even the Konami LaserScope Voice Command Optical Targeting Headset to aim and fire at generous enemy hitboxes. With either accessory, the controller is still needed for most of the game modes. The goal of each section is to survive as you travel to your destination. The aerial fighting parts feature landing sequences and boss fights where you avoid heavy firepower while targeting certain areas of a hostile craft (indicated by red arrows) with your Vulcan Cannon and missiles. If you get hit by a missile or drained of health by enemies such as the knife-wielding Kurt Slitagut, you resume play from the start of the section or checkpoint. Even if all your "rutabagas" (lives) are lost, you still have five continues to restart a mission, which you will likely need! This title offers a great variety of experiences and even includes aspects that create a personable touch, such as encountering covert agent Spider in the mazes or receiving mission briefings from your superior officer. Whether you enjoy controlling large military vehicles, spamming bullets, or exploring enemy bases, there's something for everyone here.

Reflections: I was wowed, plain and simple. For a title designed especially for the Konami LaserScope, I was expecting endless shouts of "Fire!" but was instead treated to an entertaining, well-rounded experience. Sure, it's a little weird to suddenly have to grab the Zapper while traversing a maze, and using a D-pad to move crosshairs is awkward, but it's nice that regardless of how you accessorize, you can enjoy yourself. So don your expensive plastic headgear (minus the $10 coupon in the game's manual) and strap yourself in for a laser invasion*!
*not really an invasion and certainly not with lasers – KY



Last Action Hero

Genre: Action
Release Date: Oct. 1993
Developer: Teeny Weeny Games
Publisher: Sony Imagesoft
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★

As action hero Jack Slater, the player must battle through dozens of enemies in this side-scrolling snoozer. Jack can crouch, jump, punch, and kick (A + UP) enemies. Controls are fine but hit detection is poor. Particulary, the very short punches will mean the player will take some hits unnecessarily. The presentation is pretty good – some cutscenes move the game along, graphics are alright, and the character animation is solid. Some stages with associated baddies include modern day streets, medieval castle, house, and movie theater. The gameplay, however, is not really interesting at all. Although some enemies shoot, most of the enemies just walk towards the player to get smacked away constantly with no real variation in enemy types besides sprite swapping in between levels. There are no health pick-ups, but players are given sufficient health to handle the challenge, and a few continues are available. The boss battles are also embarrassingly poorly designed – simply kicking continually will be enough to defeat them. It's mostly harmless but a very uninteresting short game.

Reflections: *Last Action Hero* was a mediocre bomb of a film that marked the start of movie stardom decline for Arnold Schwarzenegger. Sony Imagesoft seemed to have the big action movie licenses sewn up on the NES. That must have been quite a coup at the time – too bad they couldn't produce a good game of one of them to save their lives. – PC

The Last Ninja

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: Feb. 1991
Developer: System 3 Software
Ported by: Beam Software
Publisher: Jaleco
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★

This adventure game with some action elements is an extremely frustrating port of the popular computer game *Last Ninja 2: Back with a Vengeance*. Players take control of the titular ninja to take down the evil shogun Kunitok in 20th century New York City. An isometric vantage greets our player who must explore connected areas of a stage, collect items, solve puzzles by using said items (often in other areas of the stage), and fight with thugs. The main goal of each stage is to find keys to open doors to advance and move on. Moving is precarious since pressing the control pad in each direction will move in a diagonal totally unrelated. Collecting objects is tough as you have to be in precisely the right spot to pick them up, and using them can be difficult as the button combination to even arm items is awkward at best. Fighting enemies, which should be a highlight, requires little strategy and amounts to button mashing once an enemy sees you, chases you, and traps you for a face-to-face encounter. Players start with punches but can find weapons to make the job easier (but not any more fun), like swords and throwing stars. The only saving grace may be the interesting graphic design and better than average music. Compared to most NES games, this one comes off as an out-of-body experience, but that doesn't mean it's good.

Reflections: I love computer adventure games, and so whenever I look upon *The Last Ninja* it's always with a disappointing shake of my head. It may have been "Action Game of the Year" on the computer according to the game box, but on the NES it was probably "Action Game Most Regrettably Purchased." – PC

The Last Starfighter

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: June 1990
Developer: Graftgold
Publisher: Mindscape
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★

This very difficult and unfun shooter has nothing to do with the 1984 sci-fi film the game is supposed to be based on. In actuality, the game is a port of a Commodore 64 game called *Uridium*, which Mindscape then slapped a new title screen onto along with a few new sprites. As a blue spaceship in horizontally scrolling stages, you are tasked on each level to fly across giant spaceships destroying waves of fighters and ground targets until you can land at the far end of the ship after destroying a certain amount of them. Players are able to turn around and fly left/right at will while firing away. They are also able to flip the ship which doesn't seem to accomplish anything. What is a simple concept in theory is a nightmare in execution, as enemy ships come out of nowhere flying extremely fast, and shooting and/or avoiding them comes down to more luck than skill. There are also homing mines that mean almost instant death that come at you if you fly too slowly, but flying too quickly will result in you crashing into one of the many ground obstacles or incoming enemies. It's a gameplay catch-22 that results in a mess of a game. Below average music and sound effects don't help either.

Reflections: I'm sure the 15 hardcore *The Last Starfighter* movie fans were very disappointed that their long wait for a movie game resulted in this dreck. Why was there never a game based upon the actual arcade game played in the movie? Why did Mindscape get the licensing rights for a game based upon a movie that no one really cares about? Why did they think it was a good idea to release one SIX YEARS after the movie came and went? This isn't like a *Star Wars* or *Star Trek* game we're talking about here. When's the last time you heard of a *The Last Starfighter* convention? – PC

Lee Trevino's Fighting Golf

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Sept. 1988
Developer: SNK
Publisher: SNK
Players: 1-4
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★

Take to the green in this golf game featuring star Lee Trevino. Players select from one of four different golfers with different swing power, degree of control, and putting ability. Two different selectable courses can be chosen from before the action begins. On screen, players are greeted with some nice graphics featuring the course on the left and the player and surroundings on the right. The pertinent details of the ball's position, number of strokes, yards remaining, wind, etc., are on display. After selecting the club and direction of the shot, the player can swing with the A button. The longer the meter moves to the left before hitting the A button, the stronger the shot. If A is not hit before the top of the swing, a missed swing will result. Hitting A a third time near the arrow on the meter will determine if the shot is hooked, hit straight, or sliced. Placing a backspin on the ball is also more awkward than it should be. Upon being hit, the ball will be followed on the left map screen, as well as a nicely done close-up follow of the stroke on the right. Ball putting is well done, with light/bold arrows showing the direction of curvature of the green. The key issue in the game is the lack of direction in terms of knowing what club to use, as neither the game nor the manual tells you the power of each club. And while the game will put a different club in your hand as a suggestion, you'll quickly see that it may not be the proper one for the situation. Great-looking but cumbersome and lacking in features (there's only two course and two play modes), this golf outing doesn't quite hit the mark.

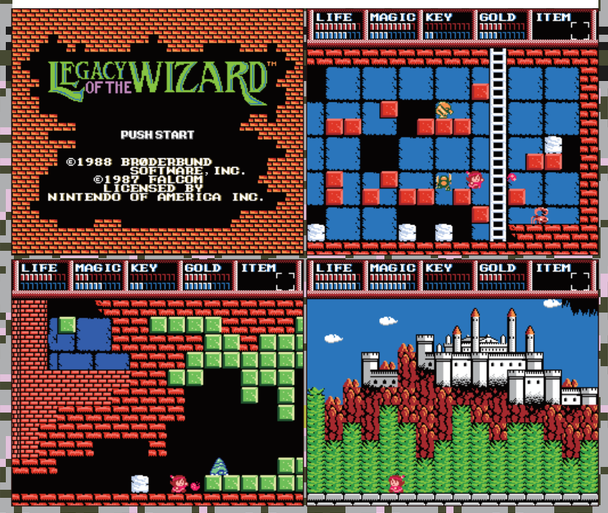
Reflections: Knowing what club to use and how strong a hit can be achieved with them is what I detest the most about golf games, so when they not only do not tell you about the clubs but also put the wrong one in your hands to use, you're making me want to play the single darts or bowling game on the system instead. Lee Trevino is known as "Super Mex" in the game, which is only inappropriate until you discover that that was his actual nickname at the time, at which point it only becomes semi-inappropriate. I feel for all those action game fans that bought this game thinking that "Fighting Golf" in the title meant a cool fighting/sports hybrid in the vein of *Base Wars*. The only fighting I can possibly see is between friends after one questions the other, "Why are we playing *Lee Trevino's Fighting Golf*"?! – PC

Legacy of the Wizard

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: Apr. 1989
Developer: Nihon Falcom
Ported by: Compile
Publisher: Brøderbund Software
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★½

To defeat the evil dragon Keela, the Drasle family must venture into a massive, maze-like dungeon and recover four hidden crowns to secure the Dragon Slayer sword. Beginning in the family's home, you choose one of seven characters: grandfather Douel, grandmother Jiela, father Xemn, mother Meyna, son Roas, daughter Lyll, or pet monster Pochi. The grandmother and grandfather are not playable and serve only to give and receive passwords, respectively. The rest have individual weapons, attack strengths/distances, and jump heights, but all have the same amount of life/magic points, and they pool the keys/gold they find. These four categories each max out at 109 units and are displayed at the top of the screen, along with up to three items selected either at home or at an inn underground (inns also replenish life/magic). The items, found in chests or shops, fundamentally shape gameplay, as some are usable exclusively by one character. For example, only Xemn can use the gloves to push blocks, only Meyna can fly with the wings, only Lyll can break blocks with the mattock, etc. Certain sections require a specific item to proceed, potentially causing backtracking to return home for the correct family member. All characters need to walk, jump, climb ladders, watch out for stalagmites and dead ends, and find unmarked false walls/ceilings/floors as they search the huge honeycomb of rooms in a side-scrolling fashion. Different dungeon areas feature different music and a variety of textures/colors to help you navigate, but map making is still a must. You will also attack many types of respawning enemies, which consumes magic. Monsters such as golems, wizards, blobs, etc. will drop gold, keys for locked doors/chests, life/magic-replenishing items, harmful poison, etc. Upon finding a crown, you are whisked away to a brief mini-boss battle, and with four crowns, Roas can get the Dragon Slayer and face Keela. This game is pleasantly labyrinthine, requiring time and patience to enjoy its complexities and handle its difficulty.

Reflections: I enjoy Pochi as a playable character. Aside from his helpful immunity to monsters and his cute appearance, he reminds me of the cherished bond between person and pet. My cat is as devoted to me as Pochi is to his family – he follows me everywhere! Sadly, as the game progresses, Pochi's inability to use most items forces him to be left at home, like I have to leave my kitty when I go to work. Then comes the end of the game, which brings the end of Pochi. No, not his untimely demise, thankfully. His *end*. Um, backside. Posterior. *Pochi-rear*. See, as the rest of the family waves civilly, Pochi stands on the rooftop, exuberantly shaking his rump. A welcome home with a butt in my face? He's even more like my cat than I thought! – AP



The Legend of Kage

Genre: Action
Release Date: Aug. 1987
Developer: Taito
Ported by: TOSE
Publisher: Taito
Players: 1–2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★

Rescue Princess Kiri and fend off ninjas and monks through the four seasons in this side-scrolling, pure action game. The hero, Kage, is equipped with unlimited shuriken and a small sword as well as incredibly acrobatic jumps. Enemies of different colors and abilities, like red ninjas that throw grenades as well as fire breathing monks, will attempt to stop the player until the stage boss arrives and play progresses to the next level. What stands out is the ability to leap quite high and far and attack mid-jump, leading to some fun and impressive action that, for a video game from 1987, roughly resembles wire work found in more outlandish martial arts films. The ability to block incoming shuriken with one's sword helps keep things balanced, as does power-up weapons and gaining extra hit-points through collecting orbs. Players must go through four levels: a forest, a moat, a castle wall, and finally the castle itself. After beating the final boss, a blue demon, the season changes and players must repeat the levels with a higher difficulty. Unlike a lot of earlier games, this does not loop infinitely and will give you a brief ending after beating all four seasons. Control feels a bit loose until one gets accustomed to it, but overall this an often overlooked title that is good, quick fun.

Reflections: I remember this game getting a lot of hate in the earlier days of the NES resurgence/collecting scene. It's pretty simple in design and the graphics are crude, but it delivers a very simple joy in the long jumps and fast combat. Enemies will spawn in trees and leap themselves as if to say "HEY! It would be cool if we clashed up here!" So we do as I'm not one to back down from sweet aerial combat. The DS sequel takes this simple concept to its conclusion and is highly recommended to any portable gamers. – IF

The Legend of Zelda

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: Aug. 1987
Developer: Nintendo R&D4
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★★★

In the land of Hyrule, Link must track down the eight pieces of the Triforce of Wisdom and rescue Princess Zelda from the evil Ganon. The gameplay takes place in an overhead perspective on single screens on the Overworld of Hyrule, with the player being able to move in the four main directions. Dozens of screens are connected to each other on a huge map with distinct locations such as woods, coastline, mountains, graveyard, and more. Play begins with Link entering a cave and getting a wooden sword from an old man. The sword (upgradeable twice in the game) is Link's primary weapon, always mapped to the A button and stabbable in the four main directions. Link's health is displayed in hearts, and when the life meter is full, the sword can fire across the screen and do damage to most enemies. Link also has a small shield, which can block minor projectile attacks. Gameplay is open-ended, with the player being able to explore and play as they wish.

Inhabiting the land of Hyrule are many nasty creatures, such as Tektites (jumping spiders), Octoroks (land octopuses that shoot rocks), Moblins (goblins armed with spears), and many more. Defeating these enemies often results in hearts, a fairy (replaces multiple hearts), and rupees, the in-game currency. These rupees may be redeemed in shops for items mapped to the B button, such as a candle, arrows (usable if the player has a bow), larger shield, blue ring (to reduce damage inflicted by enemies), and more. Exploration is encouraged and is necessary for the player to find where to travel to in order to obtain more items and to figure out where the eight dungeon labyrinths are, with each containing a piece of the Triforce. Upon finding and entering them, the dungeons will present the player with a new, usually more difficult challenge, with different/tougher enemies and an end boss that must be defeated. Inside dungeons, available items include keys to open doors, a map, compass (shows the location of the Triforce), as well as at least one item that can be added to the inventory. Some of these items, such as the boomerang and magic wand, can be used as weapons, and others, like the raft, power bracelet, and ladder, will be needed to unlock/reach other parts of the Overworld. After defeating the dungeon boss, players will receive a heart container to extend their maximum health and pick up a piece of the Triforce. Play will then resume on the Overworld, with the player being able to explore and find their way to the next dungeon, collect rupees for more items, or play as they wish. Along the way, players can discover many secrets both in dungeons and in the Overworld, such as burning trees in a forest to discover a friendly Moblin to give you rupees, or using bombs to reveal secret shops or to find shortcuts in dungeons.

The entire experience is engrossing, as the land of Hyrule and its character and backstory are constructed brilliantly, pulling the player in and making them feel like a part of a living, breathing world. The nonlinear nature of the game, revolutionary for a console game at the time, trusts the player to engage on their own terms and explore/discover how and when they want to. This unique structure, along with great and interesting enemies, great sound design, iconic music tracks, and tight action, all combine to create a truly rewarding experience. The inclusion of a battery backup (the first for an NES game), ensures that every nook and cranny of Hyrule can be explored and conquered at the player's leisure. The developers may have known that players would not want to leave the land of Hyrule, even after defeating Ganon and rescuing Zelda, so players even have the option of completing an all different second quest after the first. This is a shining jewel of not just only the NES library, but of all video games.

Reflections: It's difficult to review a game like *The Legend of Zelda* and not go on forever. Unfortunately, I had to. It's hard to look at video games without taking for granted what this game meant for the medium. Before this, console games were linear, and the worlds were fairly limited with what they could offer the player. And while computer games such as the *Ultima* series did present a world to be explored, the graphical limitations meant that that world was more in the player's head, and not alive on the screen. After the release of this game, players and developers alike would not look at video games the same way again. The backstory (presented nicely in the manual with pages of nice writing and illustration), the sprawling map with various locations, the nonlinear nature, the colorful and unique enemies, the numerous secrets, the fantastic items – any single game could have gotten one or two of these right and would have been thought of as a great game. What set *The Legend of Zelda* apart is that it contained ALL of them in a single game cart. The bar was set very high, and while other action-adventure games would try and replicate the experience on the NES, all would fall short from the standard-bearer. Legendary game designer Shigeru Miyamoto commented that his inspiration for this title came from his childhood memories of exploring fields and caves. If he didn't totally pack that exhilarating and childlike feeling of wonder into this game, he came pretty close in the attempt.

Besides the battery backup, the other big selling point of the game (and boy did it stand out) was the fact that the game was produced in a gold cart. Nintendo was making a statement, "Hey you, this game is something special!" and wanted people to be fully aware of it. I remember when this title was purchased for me by my father, and seeing the top left corner of the cartridge showing through the die-cut of the game box was a feeling I'll never forget. – PC

Legendary Wings

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: July 1988
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

Winged soldiers must take down an alien supercomputer in this combination horizontal/vertical shooter. Starting in vertical mode and armed with missiles and bombs for ground targets, players must zip around and blast simplistic stationary and moving enemies. Collecting "P" power-ups will increase the player's missile power and range up to four times, which is essential since they are very underpowered to start. While powered-up, the player will not face instant death, but rather taking damage will decrease the player's missile strength one level. Being that the player flies somewhat slowly around the screen and enemies sometimes will be overwhelming (due to aforementioned underpowered weapons), this system is of extra importance. Every other level is a fairly uninteresting and somewhat short horizontal shooter stage where the player is only armed with missiles. On the vertical-scrolling levels, it is also possible to access extra horizontal levels via whirlpool traps in each level as well as a hidden whirlpool containing bonus items that can be unlocked via bombing a ground target. While polished in the graphics and sound departments, the level and enemy design are very average, with even the bosses for each horizontal and vertical level virtually the same. Two-player action adds a slight bonus to the proceedings but doesn't improve the experience much. Lacking true inspiration, this hybrid shooter's wings don't lift the game to great heights.

Reflections: So it's the future. Supercomputers exist. Laser guns exist. Yet the greatest aerial weapon available is a set of wings strapped to a soldier? According to the manual, the God of War Ares gave these "wings of love" to the soldiers. You know, even Da Vinci was creative enough to think of cool flying machine designs besides wings to strap on your back. Ares must have gotten lazy that day. All this makes me think of is a mediocre television sitcom in the '90s that was on for way too long. – PC

Legends of the Diamond

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Jan. 1992
Developer: TOSE
Publisher: Bandai
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★

This baseball game features 30 past great MLB players, almost all of which are in the Baseball Hall of Fame. Players can select a legendary team based upon the available players, or randomly select players for a team which would include real and composite ones (in tournament mode). The gameplay in the field is solid, featuring nice graphics of the players/field and pretty good animation. Pitching control is good, but batting is very difficult, almost requiring perfect bat on ball placement to get any power into a swing, and even then fly balls and line drives aren't common. In the field players are responsive, with the ability to dive for the ball but not jump straight up. However, a problem happens at times with the game selecting the wrong player in the field to grant control to, leading to messy defensive play. Graphics are pretty nice, with some fluid movement in the field. There's some attempt to inject personality into the game, for example a humorous cutscene when a player is hit by a pitch, or random trash talking during an at bat. There are two selectable stadiums to play in and two types of weather (sunny and windy), but other than a tournament mode, there are really no other features here, making for a limited baseball experience.

Reflections: Geez, is this game difficult on the batting side. I know I'm facing Hall of Fame pitchers like Cy Young and Bob Gibson, but 90 percent of my hits were still weak grounders or pop-ups. An interesting note is that Joe Torre is in the game, but while a very good player, was nowhere near the caliber of most of the other players – maybe someone at Bandai really liked him? The top labels of all the game carts are misprinted as "Legends of the Daimond," which sounds like a fantasy shooter, or maybe a story of an adventure where you search for a giant jewel (also misspelled). – PC

Lemmings

Genre: Puzzle
Release Date: Nov. 1992
Developer: DMA Design
Ported by: Ocean Software
Publisher: Sunsoft
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★

This simple to play yet hard to master puzzle game involves guiding green-haired troll-like creatures to an exit to safey. Each stage hints as to how many Lemmings must be saved and what special actions will be helpful to the ever-marching miscreants. A trapdoor releasing the Lemmings starts each stage, and the group then moves in one direction; hitting a wall, they about face and repeat. Hitting a pitfall, water, rotating death blade, or getting them all stuck will end the task of omnipotent overlord if too many critters meet their doom. Special actions adorn the foot of the screen that will give a Lemming a particular function, including such helpful traits as builder, blocker, or bomber. There is a set amount of functions, however, so trial and error is key, especially in later stages as the challenge ramps up on each of the four difficulties. One of the later stages involves using the blocker action on the second Lemming, using the first to build a bridge over a gap. At the same time, another blocker must be used at the other end of the ledge to stop a mass killing while now using the first builder as a basher to break through a wall, then turning it into a builder again to reach the exit. Blowing up the first blocker will release the rest, giving them safe passage. Getting stuck is a curse and a reward, as there is also a "nuke" icon that decimates every living creature as a last resort. A handy password save is available so it is no hardship in starting a level again, but anger can ensue at the poorly implemented controls messing up a long stage. Holding B shifts between icons, and pressing A on a specific Lemming performs the action on them, but accidentally pressing the wrong button can ruin everything in an instant. Simplistic graphics and fun yet quickly irritating melodies round off a devilish little puzzler that really taxes the gray matter later on.

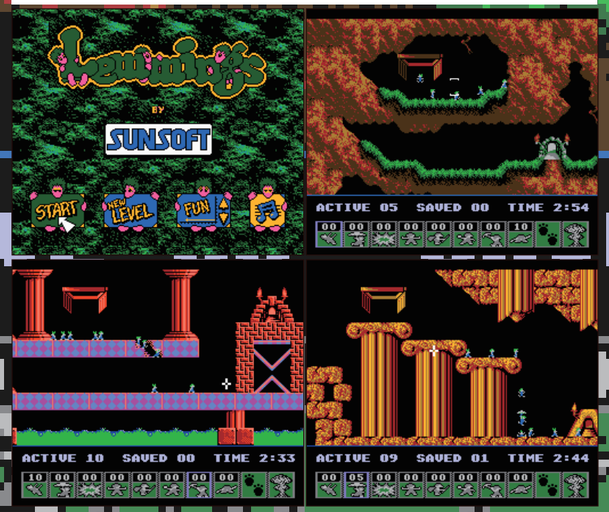
Reflections: I have never liked *Lemmings*. I always go into it with all the best intentions, but by the sixth or seventh stage I just get bored, and the sadist in me wants to find more devious ways of performing mass Lemocide. I first tried it on the Amiga using mouse control, which works far better for the quick and complex gameplay than using the less precise NES controller. At times, especially when using three or four different character actions, it becomes much harder to quickly pinpoint a specific Lemming. This can in ruin a whole board, leaving you to start again, which is especially irritating on the larger stages. Password saves are super useful, but when you have to start again (and for once it is actually the fault of the game, not because your sausage link digits cannot cope) it can become quite tedious. – JE

Lethal Weapon

Genre: Beat 'em Up, Action
Release Date: Apr. 1993
Developer: Eurocom
Publisher: Ocean Software
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

Based on the action movie series, the player takes control of detectives Riggs and Murtaugh as they battle through levels of attacking thugs. The player can switch between their fist (Murtaugh) or feet (Riggs) to attack or use their gun. The two detectives have slightly different attributes, and can be switched off on the fly by walking left out of screen. Det. Riggs has a higher jump, can utilize throwing knives, has a more effective jump kick, but has less ammo available for his gun. Det. Murtaugh has more ammo available and a more powerful melee attack, but has a less effective jump and jump kick. The thugs are pretty tough to defeat, as they shoot at you as soon as you are in their path. Questionably, shooting thugs is less effective because of this, and also because bullets do less damage then the melee attacks, which are usually safer to employ. Limited power-ups and extra energy/ammunition are available throughout the levels, which is essential since the game ends when both detectives lose a single life. It's fast moving and fun for a bit, but there's not a lot of variety in the gameplay, and it doesn't seem to follow the movie plots in the least.

Reflections: I love the *Lethal Weapon* movies. I was allowed to watch these very violent films as a kid even though I shouldn't have been allowed to. I question the developers here having Murtaugh have a more powerful punch than Riggs' kick, since Riggs was a lot younger and a martial artist. Also, it doesn't make much sense for Murtaugh to have more ammunition since he used a revolver and Riggs used a semi-automatic Beretta which had a magazine of about 16 bullets. Now I know they had to give both characters strength, but I think they went about it the wrong way (how about having Murtaugh have the same amount of ammo but stronger bullets?). It's funny that Murtaugh can do a jump kick at all, since he's a 50ish family man ready for retirement in the movies. Also, I'm not sure why the developers chose a jungle environment to start out in, as none of the movies feature that. It's like they loved playing *P.O.W.* and wanted to emulate that look. – PC



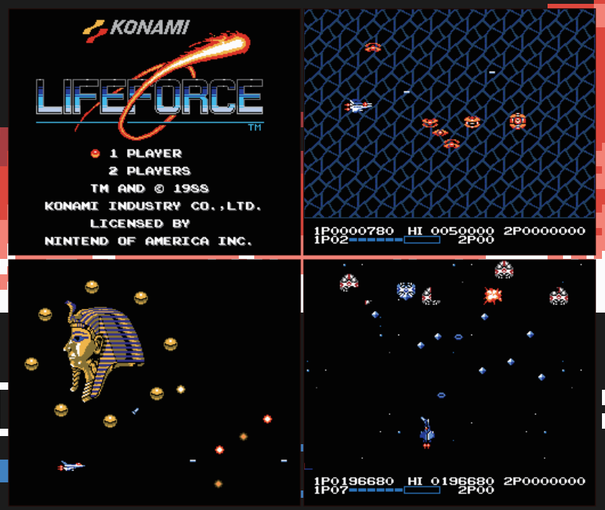
Life Force

Life Force: Salamander *(PAL)*
Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Aug. 1988
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Konami
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

This shooter sequel to *Gradius* features action that rotates between horizontally and vertically scrolling stages. The player's ship is equipped with a standard laser but can upgrade the ship's speed and weapons via capsules gained by destroying enemies. Upgrades are selectable via a menu at the bottom of the screen which scrolls through the upgrades as more capsules are gained, and it's up to the player to select which upgrade to equip. Weapon upgrades include a powerful straight laser, a ripple laser, missiles that fire to the sides, and pods that duplicate the ship's fire. Graphics and backgrounds are gorgeous, the music is fine, but it's the smooth gameplay that really shines the most in this title. Darting through the levels and destroying waves of enemies is very satisfying, as is facing the huge and varied stage bosses. Danger comes from not just the bountiful enemies but also the stages themselves, for example multiple rocks that will fly from the background or huge branches of fire that will fill the screen in the third level. It's these stage obstacles that are the most problematic, though, as in many spots they are difficult to avoid if you do not know they're coming, and are still a major problem if you do. Unfortunately, the very high difficulty will usually result in the player's ship being next to useless after losing a life (and power-ups), which will result in the player being forced to continue at the start of the level or reset in frustration. This is alleviated somewhat by the two-player simultaneous mode (a rarity for a shooter). Hardcore shooter fans will get the most out of this title, while standard players will have to resort to using the 30 life "Konami code" to stand a chance.

Reflections: I used to borrow this game often from my grandfather's neighbor as a kid. Thankfully, the existence of the 30 life Konami code made this game beatable. Without it, I had a better shot of beating myself with the game out of frustration.

There is a movie called *Lifeforce* which features a hot, nude alien woman walking around and sucking the life force out of men. Alas, this game is not based on that sci-fi horror cult classic. – PC



Linus Spacehead's Cosmic Crusade

Cosmic Spacehead *(PAL)*
Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: 1992
Developer: Codemasters
Publisher: Camerica
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Rare
★⋆

Linus has returned to Planet Linoleum from Earth, but nobody believes him! So he must go back for proof. It's a multi-genre game combining adventure and platforming, the former as destinations and the latter as roads in-between. The adventure mode screens split horizontally with scenes on top and a menu on bottom. You use a cursor to move and use the menu with A. B can cycle through commands like LOOK and USE. You interact by pointing to objects and selecting actions, like "PICK UP COIN" or "USE DOOR." Progression is quick if you explore and experiment. Most solutions are logical, like getting a passport or using "icing" to freeze water. You'll find passkeys to cities' teleporters for travel, and some grant temporary side effects which you'll need. For instance, one makes Linus glow, illuminating dark areas. If Linus walks off screen or through a door leading to a new area, an "arcade" sequence will begin. The platforming-style arcade rounds in full screen are alien, rugged, and rocky, with strange flora. Enemies are original, including exploding goo, tires, springs, amoebas, etc. However, the physics ruin everything. Linus jumps awkwardly and can't change directions in midair. He flies forward and downwards, bouncing or sliding to stop despite your efforts. It can't be understated: this "floaty" movement is disastrous. Clipping through platforms to climb them isn't a glitch, but a necessary maneuver. Linus cannot attack enemies, so they're constantly hazardous. Mercifully, you can collect candy to earn 1-ups and you only have to complete "arcade" sections once, then you're free to travel the map. There are special levels, like a car race and a giant robot, but the controls remain infuriating. It's unfortunate, since the game has colorful, cartoony artwork, cute humor, and varied music for the different locations. Any thought and creativity here is squandered.

Reflections: The story here is a little confusing – there's no explanation of how Linus got to Earth and why he needs to prove to others that he had really been there. It turns out that it's actually a sequel to *Linus Spacehead*, which was part of the *Quattro Adventure* multicart. *Linus Spacehead* has no "adventure" parts and relies entirely on its awful platforming sequences, just like how it works in the sequel. The strangest thing about the jumping is that it doesn't feel "broken" despite how terrible it feels. It's functionally bad, as though it was meant to be that way... a game-design mystery. The music in the game is memorable, similar to other Codemasters games. It's similar to what you'd hear on a Commodore 64, but played on Nintendo hardware with a lot of "vibrato" in the notes, usually purring or shaking a bit. "Linus Spacehead" is also the title of a song by rock band The Wavves. Surely there must be a connection – where else do you get a pairing of words like "Linus" and "Spacehead"? – KN

Little League Baseball: Championship Series

Genre: Sports
Release Date: July 1990
Developer: SNK
Publisher: SNK
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

This baseball title features child players/teams and celebrates the 50th anniversary of the Little League organization. 16 international teams are available, with average player strengths in four categories: batting, pitching, defense, and speed. Although individual player attributes are not listed, they each have a "skill" rating from 1-5, and batters' body types help convey the player's strength. In general, short players are quickest but weakest at the plate, husky players have the strongest bats but are slower, and tall players are average all-around. Single games are available to watch or play, as well as a 16-team single elimination tournament. Play on the field looks and controls extremely well. Graphics are bright, colorful, and the movement and animation of the players is top-notch. Players have fine controls when both pitching and batting. When pitching, players can throw curves, fastballs, and slowballs. When batting, players can move around the batter's box, hold on a swing, or even attempt a directional bunt. In the field the controls are great, with players having the ability to dive or jump up for the ball, and the other players will smartly back up the player going for the ball, or be in position to cut off throws from the outfield. Players can even adjust both the outfield and infield formation from the pitching screen, adding an element of defensive strategy. Everything plays very smoothly, and nice touches, such as pitchers barking at the fielders, nervous players at bat, or ones upset after striking out, really add a sense of realism and flavor to the proceedings. Being that it's Little League rules, there's no leading off bases (you can still steal), and there are only six innings instead of nine. While there aren't a lot of extra options or features, the game on the field is fine for an afternoon on the diamond.

Reflections: Based on the *Baseball Stars* engine, this game comes off as a reskinned, stripped-down version with far less features and no battery backup. It's not a bad game, but when push comes to shove, it's a tinier version of a much better one. But maybe that's in the spirit of Little League itself? I played little league baseball for 10 years. Not Little League, but little league (think Jello versus the generic gelatin). Our team caps, affectionately and humorously, were labeled after the team's sponsors, such as "Laurel's Paint" and "Fred's Auto Body Repair." I myself was considered husky (a nicer term for fat), but I was deceptively quick, and would often steal bases in my own, pudgy way. When batting, I was good at making contact, but never hit for power. Once, just once, I legitimately hit a homerun, only to have the drunk coach of the other team successfully argue that it went under the fence and not over it. So instead of my home run of glory, I was stuck with the most beautiful ground rule double ever, and one that I'll always remember. – PC

The Little Mermaid

Genre: Action
Release Date: July 1991
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⋆

The evil Ursula has magically enslaved the sea, so what will you do? Wait for your boyfriend and dad to save you? No way - you got this! Inspired by the Disney animated film, this game is like a side-scroller with some vertically scrolling areas. However, it plays like a shooter since Ariel swims in any direction and only shoots in front of herself. By swishing her tail, she creates bubbles that can stun and entrap enemies such as fish and lobsters. She can then throw the bubbled baddies at other enemies to defeat both. At first, two hits are needed to trap enemies in bubbles, but collecting red and green pearls upgrades Ariel's attack power and range, respectively. Some large enemies, such as octopuses, can only be trapped after you get two red pearls, and some obstacles, such as rocks and stones, also require more power. You can find pearls in treasure chests that open with magic shells or rocks, although some chests are empty and others take more planning to unlatch. The shells are also weapons that Ariel can hold and ram into baddies to defeat them. Swishing Ariel's tail in sand or tossing bubbled enemies into nooks in ceilings and walls can reveal shells, hearts for replenishing health (up to a maximum of five), and bonus point items including "snarfblatts" (pipes). Occasionally, extra lives are hidden in hard-to-reach areas. Each level ends with a boss, such as a sea captain seahorse, a walrus, Flotsam and Jetsam, and others. The enemy fish and crustaceans are well drawn and animated, plus the music is quite enjoyable. The levels are uniquely themed but not particularly original, including an ice level, volcano level, a sunken ship, and others. There are only five, and they're not terribly difficult, especially with copious continues. It's fun, but you'll be saying, "*I want moooooore*!"

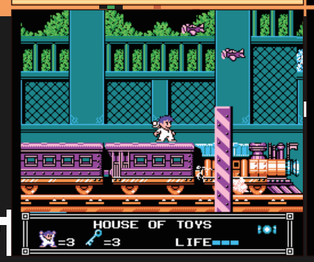
Reflections: While playing *The Little Mermaid*, I was surprised by how little I'd forgotten about it. I still have the cartridge and box from my childhood - I loved the film, watched the TV cartoon series, and had Ariel dolls, so naturally, I had the game. It was great to play a good girls' title that even featured Ariel being heroic (which she wasn't in the film; let's be honest). One time, I faked being sick at school so I could go home and play it more. I feel bad about that now - if only I had owned the faithful Game Boy version, too. – KN

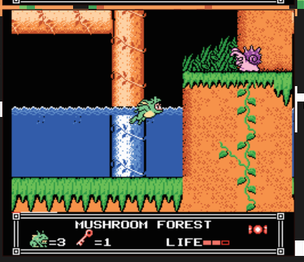
Little Nemo: The Dream Master

Genre: Platformer
Release Date: Sept. 1990
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

Little Nemo must travel through eight "dreams" (levels) in Slumberland to meet Princess Camille and rescue King Morpheus from the Nightmare King. Nemo can jump, but his only weapon until the final level is an unlimited supply of candy, which he tosses in an arc. The sweets merely stun most enemies. However, some creatures will fall asleep upon consuming three candies. Nemo can then ride them or assume their forms as if they were costumes. Doing so may increase the capacity of Nemo's life bar (usually just three blocks), but it reverts back to normal when Nemo does (by pressing SELECT). More importantly, the creatures provide many special abilities: the frog jumps high and bellyflops on enemies, the lizard enters narrow spaces, the gorilla climbs and punches, the hornet flies and flings stingers, etc. These skills are crucial to exploring the lush and imaginative levels, which include Mushroom Forest, Flower Garden, House of Toys, Night Sea, Nemo's House, Cloud Ruins, Topsy-Turvy, and Nightmare Land. All levels but the last require multiple keys, some of which are in secret areas, to unlock their exit doors. As Nemo searches, he'll tangle with many respawning enemies, such as crows, snails, and flying turtles, as well as many hazards, such as deadly spikes, flame bursts, and a few tense auto-scrolling sequences. He'll also find health-replenishing kits/drinks and extra lives. After the seventh level, Princess Camille gives Nemo the Morning Star, a magic wand that can both strike and charge to fire an energy ball. With it, he'll enter the eighth level and face two mini-bosses before fighting the Nightmare King. This game is as delightful as it is difficult – the engaging soundtrack and colorful backgrounds (which include a sunken ship, buildings in the sky, and an upside-down level) are matched by merciless enemies and tricky obstacles. While there are unlimited continues, a password system would have been better, as you do have to wake up from dreams eventually.

Reflections: Nemo's a reluctant hero. When asked by Princess Camille to rescue her father, he replies, "Um...I don't think I can. I'm just a little boy." This is after having battled through seven deadly dreams, mind you. It's surprising he even makes it that far, considering the game's opening – a wondrous zeppelin descends from a starry sky, and a sprightly messenger invites Nemo to Slumberland at the Princess's request. Does he jump at the chance, marveling at the fantastic adventures in store? Nah, he instead dwells repeatedly on the fact that if Camille's "a princess, then she must be a girl," and he's not too thrilled. The kid has no problem drugging frogs with candy and climbing inside their flesh for a romp, but visiting a girl? *Ick.* – AP





Little Ninja Brothers

Genre: Action-RPG
Release Date: Dec. 1990
Developer: Culture Brain
Publisher: Culture Brain
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★★⋆

In this action-RPG hybrid, players take control of Jack and Ryu (in two-player mode), brother ninjas who must defeat Blu Boltar and the Yoman Clan to restore peace to Chinaland. Gameplay starts in an overhead map view, where players may walk around the land, traveling to towns, chateaus, and castles to complete missions, gathering items, with the main objective being to obtain seven bells needed to complete the quest. Random encounters with enemies will engage one of two modes. The first is a turn-based command battle with enemies where the player can choose attacks, defense, items, etc., and see the result play out. The vast majority of the action of random encounters, however, takes place in a single-screen overhead beat 'em up mode. In these encounters, players will use a punch and jump kick attack to take out comical enemies. Rocks and blocks can be punched to reveal power-ups in the form of Dragon Kicks, throwing stars, and the Mighty Ball (powerful projectile attack). After defeating the wave of enemies, players will be rewarded with experience points and money. Experience points will level up players occasionally to increase their attack strength and maximum life points. In towns, besides talking to people, gaining information, and sometimes fulfilling missions, players can use their cash to purchase weapon upgrades, defensive items, items to help in the quest like candles and talismans, stop at the inn to restore life points, and get a helpful password and even switch between one and two players playing the game. Opportunities exist also to engage in fun mini-games to help learn the various skills of the game. There's a lot to see and do, with a light-hearted, comical story and a nice graphical style in the cutscenes that resembles anime, as well as charming music that fits the tone of the game perfectly. There's some pitfalls to the gameplay, as the action is slightly too simplistic and enemies can be very overpowering if the player does not grind enough first to level up, but that's typical of the RPG genre. This is a unique and inventive action-RPG that doesn't take itself too seriously, with a bonus two-player mode if a friend wants to join in on some comical ninja action.

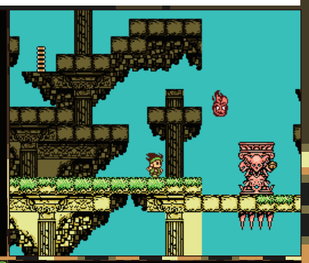
Reflections: One the main reasons I tend to stay away from the RPG genre (besides the fact that grinding is unfun) is that the stories don't usually interest me. *The Dragon Warrior*-esque medieval "save the princess and defeat the wizard" story just doesn't do much for me, nor does selecting "attack" in battles 500 times to level up. At least in an action-RPG, you have some sort of interactivity when fighting. This is a pleasant surprise in the NES library – and I'm glad I had the chance to review it here. – PC

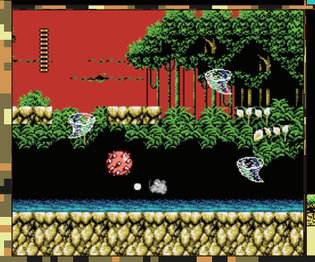
Little Samson

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Nov. 1992
Developer: Takeru
Publisher: Taito
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★★⋆

Four heroes have been summoned by Emperor Hans to help in a time of trouble - Ta-Keed the Prince of Darkness has escaped from captivity, vowing revenge upon the kingdom. In this fun and inventive action-platformer, you take control of Little Samson and his companions, switching between the characters at will after clearing their personalized stages at the beginning. Each of the heroes possesses their own unique strengths and powers. Samson is a formidable high jumper, and Kikira the Dragon Lord can fly for brief periods. Gamm the Rock Lord can walk over spikes, and K.O. the Enchanted Beast (mouse) is able to traverse narrow passageways. But Ta-Keed's minions come in many forms, too, and murderous enemies such as fire-breathing flowers and bouncing eyeballs are strategically scattered throughout the levels. The fighting foursome must find dolls for extra lives as well as hearts and potions for replenishing energy. The map screen shown between levels displays the many perilous places that must be conquered, including a frosty ice castle and a haunted forest. Interestingly, there is no individual level music for this game. Instead, each protagonist has their own theme song that plays whenever they're on screen. Controls are precise and satisfying, and obliterating enemies while jumping from platform to platform has rarely been this much fun. The presentation is colorful and creative, with immersive stage designs, awesome bosses, and gorgeous animation - just look at Samson spin as he jumps! Don't be fooled, there is nothing "little" about this game. Except for the titular hero, of course... and the little amount of boredom you'll feel while playing!

Reflections: This game is truly beautiful to behold in terms of design and animation. However, my favorite aspect of this legendary title is the loving bits of character development that are injected throughout. A stellar moment takes place toward the beginning of the game, right after each of the four characters arrive at the emperor's castle. The heroes have joined and are ready to embark on their quest, but Kikira blocks Samson from exiting. Apparently, she takes exception to his leadership, and Samson must defeat her in order to earn the dragon's respect. Little touches like that add depth and personality to the game's story and characters - Kikira has a problem with authority; got it! It's hard to transform an 8-bit sprite into a living, breathing entity, but Little Samson makes me a believer! – DM





Lode Runner

Genre: Action, Puzzle
Release Date: Sept. 1987
Developer: Doug Smith
Ported by: Hudson Soft
Publisher: Brøderbund Software
Players: 1-2
Special Features: Edit Mode
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

Players must take back gold from the Bungeling Empire in this action/puzzle hybrid. Several piles of gold must be collected, and players will have to reach them by climbing ladders and hand walking across horizontal hanging ropes in stages that scroll horizontally. Players have the ability to create holes in brick surfaces to the left or right of them, using B and A respectively. These temporary holes can allow the player to reach areas beneath them, although players have to be careful not to be squashed by them since they fill again after a few seconds. This digging technique is also the only way to fend off the Bungeling guards who will come after the player. If they fall into holes made by the player, the player will then be able to humorously walk over their heads and past them. However, the guards will climb out of the holes after a few seconds (players do not have this ability). If players time it, they can trap guards in holes and squish them before they can climb out, although they will respawn at the top of the screen. The challenge lies in not only effectively avoiding the guards, but also planning the proper path to gold and planning and making sure not to get stuck in an area while trying to retrieve gold, since there are spots where this can occur regularly. If that happens, players can restart the level or attempt one of the 50 challenging ones available. Other options include the ability to alter the speed of the game as well as being able to create your own level to try out. Fans of puzzle action will get the most out of this title, as there are definitely sections that are head-scratchers, like figuring out how to properly ascend/dig into a group of bricks and get out without trapping yourself. It appears simple, but there's a genius level of complexity inherent in the design. For a well-thought-out and charming time, you could do worse than taking out Bungelings and stealing gold.

Reflections: *Lode Runner* was a ground-breaking game that was released on computers in 1983. The level editor was a revolutionary addition, and was so popular that magazines held contests where people created and submitted their own to see whose were best. In fact, *Championship Lode Runner* (1984) contained 50 fan-designed levels! Various versions of *Lode Runner* have been released on a plethora of systems since then, proving that not only can a simple concept go far, but it can thrive decades later. – PC

The Lone Ranger

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: Aug. 1991
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Konami
Players: 1
Special Features: Zapper (optional), Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★★⯪

Players take on the mantle of legendary Western hero The Lone Ranger, who is out to stop outlaw Butch Cavendish and rescue the President. Gameplay consists of a few different game modes: overhead and side-scrolling run and gun shooter modes, and a first-person shooter mode. Players begin on an overhead map, where they can move around on roads to travel to towns, villages, caves, mountains, and other locations. The game is structured into several different missions. Players usually travel into a town (overhead perspective) to speak to someone in the town or the Sheriff, who will give them an objective to fulfill, such as defeating an outlaw or retrieving an object. While in towns/villages, players may talk to people, see the Sheriff, heal their life bar at the doctor, buy ammo/weapons, visit a first-person shooting range, and even play poker. Most of these activities cost money, which is collected by taking out gunslingers, bandaleros, etc. Armed with a standard punch, players can switch off to use a six-shot revolver with two different types of ammo, or toss TNT. In overhead mode, B will shoot and A will nicely stop the player and give them the ability to pivot in all eight directions to aim better. In side-scrolling levels, B will attack and A will jump, as players will jump, climb stairs, and platform to reach the end of the level (and sometimes face an enemy boss). The first-person levels are very interesting, as players will advance screen by screen in all four directions. They will sometimes be waylaid by a group that the player will have to shoot with a cursor or the Zapper, while having to turn in all four directions when an indicator on the bottom of the screen tells you what direction the enemies are attacking from. All three of these modes are very well polished, although the side-scrolling levels can require jumps to be a tad bit too precise. On each mission, players can then travel to various areas in that map section to bring information or objects back to complete it or receive new directions or clues. When traveling on the road map, at times players will be forced to run into an outlaw icon to begin a mini-stage in one of the game modes. There's a lot of technical refinement and polish to the gameplay and graphics here, especially in areas like the side-scrolling train level or first-person levels on horseback. A nice story, good presentation, and lots to do all make for a very engaging Old West adventure.

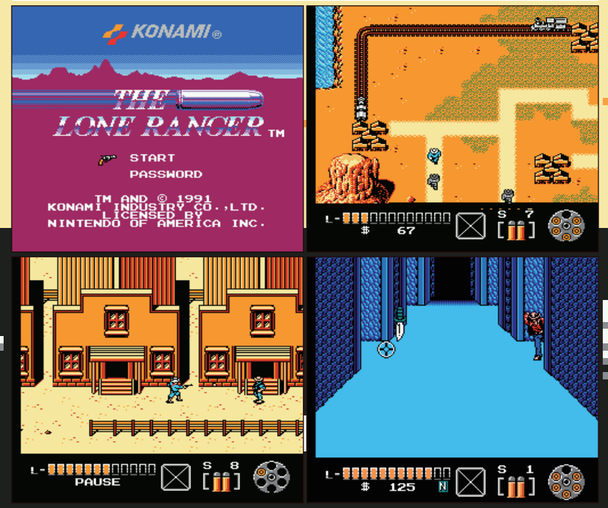
Reflections: What type of sheriff lets outlaws hang out 10 feet from his building?! Do your job! I barely remember this game as a kid, and no one else apparently did either, since it didn't sell too many copies. That's a shame, since this is one of Konami's strongest outings on the NES, where they managed to step a little out of their comfort zone and still deliver something special. A bit of trivia: The Lone Ranger is the ancestor of another masked hero, The Green Hornet! – PC

Loopz

Genre: Puzzle
Release Date: Oct. 1990
Developer: Audiogenic Software
Ported by: Bits Studios
Publisher: Mindscape
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★

In this puzzle game, the player is given random pipe-like pieces on a board, and the objective is to complete a loop to make it disappear from the board. The larger the loop, the more points the player will get. There is a timer to place your pieces that winds down at a certain speed, based upon the difficulty level the player selects. The game ends when the timer runs down three times because either the player had failed to place a piece or there is no space to place it. Strategy is limited since the player is not given a preview of what the next random piece will be, so planning out a plan of attack is next to impossible. The game is very ho-hum since you only play for points, and there is no level advancing, no changing of the drab background – absolutely nothing changes in the gameplay experience. The game simply continues at the same pace until the inevitable game over occurs. It's a mundane experience, not helped at all by the very strange and droning music. There is also a second mode that allows the player to try and reconstruct a particular shape using specific pieces, but it's also an exercise in boredom.

Reflections: *Loopz* is one of the many puzzle games that tried to capitalize on the *Tetris* craze. Unfortunately, it's very hard for a puzzle game to not only be unique and inventive, but fun as well. *Loopz* was ported over from a computer version and has absolutely none of the charm that it takes for a puzzle game to gain notoriety. Take note, all you puzzle programmers out there! Give your puzzle game personality and don't have music that makes you want to slit your wrist! – PC



Low G Man: The Low Gravity Man

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Sept. 1990
Developer: KID
Publisher: Taxan
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

In 2284, aliens have hijacked a robot factory planet, planning to use it to eradicate humanity. As elite warrior Low G Man, you must stop them in this action-platformer that features good music, complex backgrounds, cutscenes, a simple password system, and unique mechanics. Your default weapon, the Electro-Magnetic Disruptor Pistol (EMDP), only freezes enemies, which you must then jump over or under to stab with your spear. Confusingly, B operates both your gun and spear, the latter activating when you press UP or DOWN. Fortunately, you can mega-jump relative to how long you hold A, and collecting more anti-gravity material (AGM) capsules allows you to leap almost two screens upwards. That's great for attacking flying robots and dodging bullets from tanks, ships, canons, insectoid aliens, and more. Specific enemies drop more conventional weapons: boomerangs, waves, fireballs, and bombs. These are exhaustible, but they, the gun, and the spear can be upgraded by collecting more of their icons (until you need a continue). Other items include restorative medicine, harmful red medicine, extra lives, temporary invincibility shields, and bells for points. Some enemies drive vehicles you can/must commandeer, including a spider tank that smashes enemies and a hovercraft that shoots infinite bombs. These supplant your life bar with their fuel. The game's five chapters are large and visually diverse, showcasing colorful skies, rocky cliffs, caves, ice, alien ships, etc. Some have alternate routes, hidden areas, and trapped humans to rescue. Each scene ends with a boss, most of which are creatively designed and range in size, such as a crane tank, a spiral-shaped alien, an octopus-crab, and a giant brain. Unfortunately, the animations get choppy, knockback and recovery from hits can get annoying, there's a timer, and the difficulty may become unmanageable. Still, it's an interesting game that's worth trying.

Reflections: "Jankiness" might be *Low G Man*'s central flaw; sprites appear misaligned during scrolling, and nothing's smooth. Maybe that's caused by the combination of detailed backgrounds with multi-directional scrolling, which not all developers could achieve. Scrolling one axis was miraculous in the '80s, and although the NES hardware could do it well, some developers couldn't even implement that correctly. Regardless of causation, some other games, good and bad, also have this pervasive environmental instability, but people often forget awkward details like this when they're feeling nostalgic about 8-bit aesthetics. - KN

Lunar Pool

Genre: Billiards
Release Date: Oct. 1987
Developer: Compile
Publisher: FCI
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⯪

This fun and interesting spin on the classic pool game features oddly shaped tables with interesting angles and adjustable friction – and apparently it takes place on the moon. The goal in single-player mode is to sink all the balls before progressing to the next table. Players select the direction of the cue ball and the power of each shot. Every shot that fails to place a ball in a pocket deducts one of three shot chances while sinking a ball restores them. Chaining multiple successful shots together adds more points. There is a definite puzzle-game feel in the later stages. Physics are decent for the time, and once players work them out, placing balls with precision becomes second nature. The aforementioned adjustable friction allows for a lot of replays as it can make the balls seemingly glide on ice or nudge around boulders. There's a two-player mode against either human or CPU opponents. This is a sleeper worth playing for those looking for something outside the standard fare, although it's a bit disappointing that the developers didn't utilize the great future vibe from the cover art a little bit more.

Reflections: The cover art comforts me. It's nice to see that in a future where we all wear tight spandex and live in space that a simple game of pool is still a common way to unwind. I wonder what astro beer will taste like. Chalky? Like that space ice cream? – IF

M.C. Kids
***McDonaldland** (PAL)*
Genre: Platformer
Release Date: Feb. 1992
Developer: Virgin Games
Publisher: Virgin Games
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

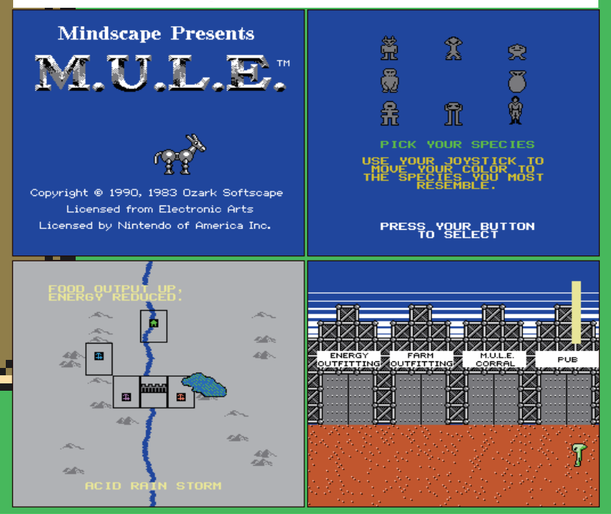
In this platformer set in a McDonald's restaurant-themed world, players navigate through various side-scrolling levels using moving platforms, boats, springboards, and their own two feet in an effort to foil the Hamburglar. In a nice touch, players can pick from two different characters that play the same but represent two different races, an early example of some diversity in a game. Decent level construction and little secrets everywhere make these segments more fun to run through than one might expect from a game based on insane burger chain mythos. There are blocks that can send the player flying back, platforms that can flip players to the underneath of platforms to reach seemingly impossible areas, and overall good use of stage design. There is a map for each world connecting the levels, and instead of progressing to the next area by beating a final stage, players must collect an appropriate number of puzzle pieces hidden throughout all of them. This is what really drags the game down, as the title could have been just fine as a speedy diversion without all the backtracking and collecting. The graphics are nice and colorful though, and overall the whole experience is passably enjoyable.

Reflections: Despite ranking McDonald's somewhere between gross and sinister, this is a title I wish I enjoyed more. A number of the levels are fun to explore, but I don't want to be forced to explore everything. It would be much better if it progressed like any other platformer and used the hidden puzzle pieces to open up optional secret areas. – IF

M.U.L.E.
Genre: Strategy
Release Date: Sept. 1990
Developer: Ozark Softscape
Ported by: Mindscape
Publisher: Mindscape
Players: 1-4
Special Features: NES Four Score / Satellite compatible
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★½

This computer port is a seminal supply and demand strategy simulator in space. You are settlers on planet Irata (a palindrome) vying to become the richest over the months (rounds). Instead of fighting, you compete through economics! With MULEs (Multiple Use Labor Elements), you produce and sell food, Smithore, and energy from your land. You can play on different difficulty settings, as diverse species with individual competencies. In every round, there's a time limit to select a plot of land from the map and walk to the colony town, where you enter stores to buy a MULE and equipment for its job. To install the MULE, you lead it to its plot on the map, and if you have time left you can go gambling (but you don't actually play). Land features on the map indicate a plot's proficiency, like rivers for farming. Random events that affect players scroll in text on the screen, including pirates, prizes, resource shortages, and more. For instance, a food shortage curtails the time your turns lasts – a serious setback. There's also a "Wampus" creature which you can hunt for treasure on the map occasionally. Between rounds players sell goods on a graph representing market prices (determined by supply/demand), on which you walk up or down to buy or sell. Should you sell food now or wait for increases? Buy Smithore now or later? That's where skill factors in. Economics might seem cryptic, but the interface is easy. However, it's also dull. Even for its era the graphics and sound are spartan. Although, the simplicity makes the game quicker. It can be fun, especially considering it supports four gamepads. If you have friends, this feature may make the NES version worth owning.

Reflections: *M.U.L.E.* on the NES is a near-perfect port of the 8-bit Atari computer version, but is that a good thing? The NES version could have been great but is instead serviceable. It doesn't do anything new to take advantage of the hardware besides adding easier and more comfortable multiplayer with the Four Score or Satellite. All it needed was some little extras, like more color, animations, and useful music and sound effects. Random events in this game are indicated by a scrolling text crawl at the top of the screen. A handful of events get more than that, but usually it's just text and silence. It's also kind of weird that you gamble, but you don't get to play. It's not that kind of game, I suppose; what other NES manual discusses "the law of diminishing returns," "free enterprise system," and "The Prisoner's Dilemma"? This really is a non-NES game on the NES, and for better or worse it is a challenge to our expectations of how an NES game is "supposed" to look and feel. Perhaps a game doesn't need "presentation," but players do. – KN



M.U.S.C.L.E.
Genre: Wrestling
Release Date: Oct. 1986
Developer: TOSE
Publisher: Bandai
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

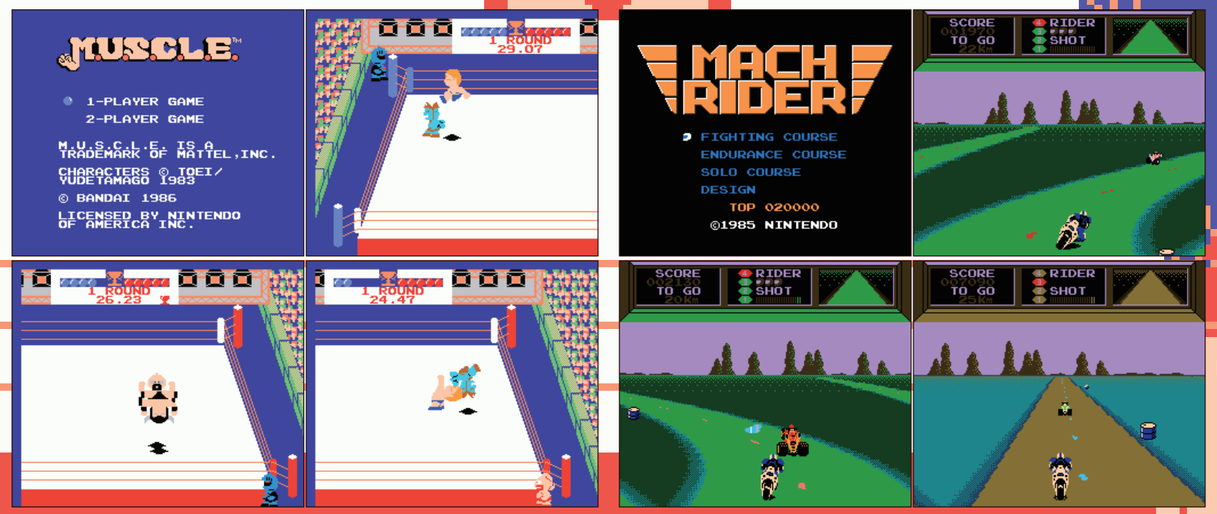
Get set for comical in-ring action in this tag team wrestling game based upon the toy line. Players select their two-man team from eight available wrestlers and the game begins. Gameplay amounts mostly to a fighting game, with all players having the same ability to punch, jump kick, bounce off the ropes for a jump punch, and sneak behind the opponent for a backdrop suplex. There's minimum strategy involved, based mostly on timing and spacing, and it's possible for both human and computer players to get in a cheap string of attacks in succession. The matches are two out of three rounds, with the round ending when one opponent loses all their energy. If they're running low, players can tag their partner in which will replenish the team's health. The crux of the gameplay is based off of the "booster balls," which are glowing balls that enter the ring from time to time. If a wrestler grabs one they will flash for a limited amount of time, increasing their speed, strength, and enabling them to unleash a devastating special move which will quickly drain the other wrestler's health. When an opponent gets caught by a powered-up opponent like this, it can result in several special moves in a row and a quick end to the match. There's little else to experience, save for rings with slippery ice and ones with electrified ropes that can hurt wrestlers. There's some simple charm here, but not enough depth to make it truly worthwhile.

Reflections: I had lots of MUSCLE figures as a kid (that's Millions of Unusual Small Creatures Lurking Everywhere for the uninitiated). They were great, with zany designs, and there was even a ring you could buy that they could battle in! In Japan, they were known as Kinnikuman, which was a zany professional wrestling manga/anime. I remember stumbling upon the NES game as a child and, not knowing what to expect, was extremely disappointed. I didn't expect *Pro Wrestling* quality necessarily, but this was just below my expectations. I was a tough critic, even as a kid. – PC

Mach Rider
Genre: Action, Racing
Release Date: Aug. 1986
Developer: Nintendo R&D2
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1
Special Features: Edit Mode
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★

This futuristic racing combat game has the player controlling a motorcycle and hitting the road on 10 courses. Each stage consists of two different road paths the player may take, and the object is to just survive until reaching the end. Controls consist of accelerating and shifting up/down between four gears by using UP/DOWN on the control pad. Players may also fire guns (with limited ammo) at the enemy vehicles that approach from the front. They also can approach from the rear (seen via rear mirror view), where they can slam into and destroy the player. Balancing maintaining speed to avoid being hit from the rear and not traveling too fast to navigate turns presents the main challenge of the game, as well as avoiding the road hazards, some of which will cause you to slide (puddles, tacks), and some of which will destroy you on contact (rocks, oil drums, bomber balls). The game conveys a great sense of speed and the controls are fine, but maintaining that fine balance of speed versus control can be a tough challenge. The fact that the player's ammo is limited also complicates matters and is an unnecessary burden. Still, the gameplay is impressive enough, if a little unrefined, and good enough for a little futuristic fun. Timed race modes are available to the player to dabble in, both with and without enemies, and there's also a design mode to create your own race.

Reflections: I remember playing this game at my sister's friend's house with her friend's brother. We hung out a few times when my sister would hang out with her friend for a few hours, so my mom would drop us both off. I remember playing this game, *10-Yard Fight*, and *Pro Wrestling* a lot. I also remember going into the backyard, where this older boy would kick my ass at one-on-one tackle football. I'm not sure why I usually shy away from playing *Mach Rider*, but I'm sure that memory doesn't help. – PC

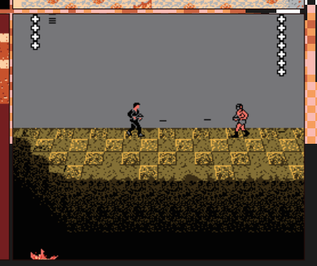


Mad Max

Genre: Action
Release Date: July 1990
Developer: Gray Matter
Publisher: Mindscape
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

Max lives in a post-apocalyptic desert world where the search for gasoline is what drives humanity. He begins each of the three stages in a road war, a top-down driving section. Hold down the D-pad to move in the corresponding direction, and keep an eye on the fuel gauge in the lower left. Once it's depleted, Max starts the section over. While driving, he can throw dynamite to take down barriers on the road, destroy other cars, and neutralize gang fortresses. Spread throughout the map are mine shaft entrances, where Max searches on foot for supplies such as ammo and fuel. The goal of a road war is to find enough food and water in the caves to purchase an arena ticket from a service station. This allows Max to access the arena, another driving section that's on an enclosed set of paths with dozens of enemy vehicles. Here, and without the benefit of weapons, Max must get rid of the other cars by either damaging them or forcing them off the edge of the road. Occasionally, pits open in the middle of the paths, potentially leading to the doom of any car. Once Max is the last one standing, the exit to the arena opens to the next stage. He gets three chances to reach the exit, or he's sent back to the road war section. After the third and final arena, Max faces the "Ultimate Warrior" in crossbow-to-crossbow action. This is an interesting game that does a fair job of presenting the world of the eponymous movie series, but it lacks satisfying gameplay. Although it is necessary to explore and find several locations on each map, it's difficult to do so with such limited supplies. This is a short experience that nevertheless becomes monotonous by the end, but it may be good to play for someone wanting a different driving title.

Reflections: Warning! There is little in this game that connects it to the movies! Sure, you've got Max and his vehicle blowing up gang members, and a few cameos appear, but when I got to the final boss, I thought, "Wait, what happened that I'm fighting this guy *now*?" At this point of the NES's life, I feel I can fault the developers for not throwing a few screens of story up during the game. Other than that, the controls are fluid, the environments are thematic, and who doesn't love cars made for destruction? – KY



The Mafat Conspiracy

Genre: Action
Release Date: June 1990
Developer: Aicom
Publisher: Vic Tokai
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

Assassin Golgo 13 is back to take down the Mafat terrorist group and prevent World War III in this sequel to *Top Secret Episode*. The game begins and is connected via well done cinematic cutscenes which tell the story. The main gameplay mode is side-scrolling action, with the player tasked to take out henchmen armed with guns, grenades, knives, boomerangs, and scythes. Other foes include monkey men, dogs, and scorpions. Golgo 13 is armed with a kick attack, but can gain a pistol to fire at enemies. Additional ammo can be obtained from fallen enemies, but additional health can only be obtained sparingly by entering buildings and taking out an enemy in the 3D maze mode. The side-scrolling stages begin simply but eventually get very tough with precarious jumps, all while having to beat out the clock. A few one-on-one boss battles end these levels, with Golgo using punches and kicks to take them out. Interspersed with the side-scrolling stages are other types: driving, sniping, and the aforementioned 3D mazes. The 3D mazes consists of traveling through multi-level labyrinths in first-person mode with the help of a compass, while taking out enemies who can appear. It's very easy to get lost in these, so using the maps supplied in the instruction manual is essential, especially when having to escape back out of them in a limited amount of time. The two third-person perspective driving levels are somewhat simple and short, with the player having to accelerate, shift gears, and reach the finish line in the allotted time by avoiding enemy cars or throwing explosives to destroy them. The sniping mode consists of Golgo having to take out a target with a single rifle shot in first person using a target scope while adjusting aim for the wind speed shown. While each mode itself isn't fantastic on its own, they blend nicely with the mature story. Graphics are pretty strong, especially background work, with a highlight being the train stage and its very nice parallax scrolling effects. The challenge is considerable, but unlimited continues will keep you going. If you're looking for a unique gaming experience with a nice and mature story that twists and turns, look no further than the man with the custom M-16.

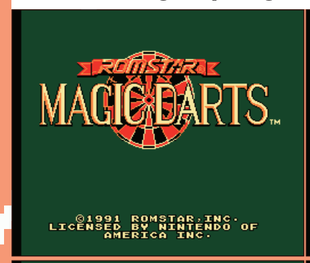
Reflections: It's a shame that there was never another true Golgo 13 console game (an N64 game was cancelled), with there only being a couple of Playstation motion comics and a weak DS trivia/mini-game release. In Japan, there are a few different first-person arcade sniping games (with an M-16!), similar in style to the *Silent Scope* series. In these, Golgo is hired to take out targets, sometimes in creative ways. I'm not really sure why more Golgo games aren't made, nor why there aren't any movies being made with the character. At the very least, you can check out the excellent 50-episode animated series, which are vary faithful adaptations of stories from the manga. – PC

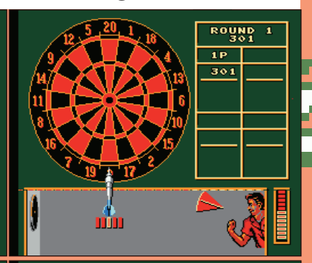
Magic Darts

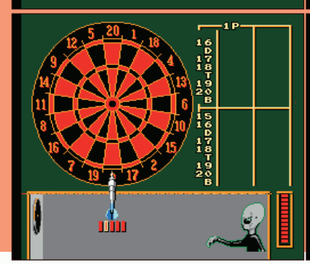
Genre: Sports
Release Date: Sept. 1991
Developer: SETA
Publisher: Romstar
Players: 1-4
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★

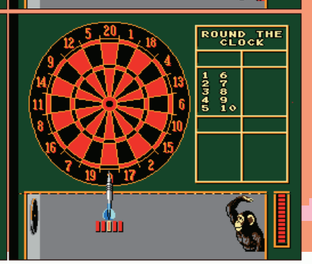
This dart-throwing title consists of five different games that can be played. 301, 501, and 701 are games where the player must be the first to score that many points on the board without going over, which if it occurs will put the score back to where it was before the final shot. Count Up is a simple game of eight rounds where the object is to score the most points, Round the Clock tasks the player to hit numbers 1 through 10 in order, and Half It starts the player at 40 points, and if the player(s) do not hit a specific number, the player's score will be halved after that turn. Players start by selecting the game type, the number of human players (up to four), entering a short name and selecting one of 12 unique characters, and then selecting one of three dart weights. After selecting the computer opponents (if desired) and their characters, the game begins. The gameplay screen is split three ways: the top left shows the dart board, the top right shows the current round and player scores, and the bottom shows a view of both the dart board and the current dart thrower from a side angle. Players throw a dart using a three-tier meter system. First, players can horizontally maneuver the dart in first-person perspective. The A button starts the throwing process. The first meter defines how straight the throw is, the second defines the vertical angle, and the final meter defines the throwing power. The resulting throw result is based upon the combination of the three meters and starting aim, along with the type of dart the player uses. The throw is seen simultaneously in both the board window and the bottom one showing the player's throw. The dart throws are fluid and nicely animated, and differ in type based upon the colorful assorted characters. Besides normal human players, there's a ninja, alien, robot, chimp, and even a kung fu master. Some have a trick shot that can be utilized (if figured out), although they are more for show than function. The gameplay is fun and emulates dart throwing the best an 8-bit console could, but the lack of any extra modes or features may prevent lengthy replay value. However, if you're looking for video game darts, you can't do much better.

Reflections: I specifically remember this title being advertised/featured in an issue of *Nintendo Power*, and I still remember seeing the robot and chimpanzee opponents on the page. I didn't play the game until at least a decade later, but never really gave it an entirely fair shake until replaying it for this book. Suffice to say, it's a fine translation of the dart throwing experience, minus the effect of alcoholic beverages improving and/or worsening throws. – PC







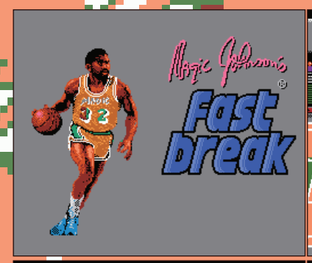


Magic Johnson's Fast Break

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Mar. 1990
Developer: Arcadia Systems
Ported by: Software Creations
Publisher: Tradewest
Players: 1, 2, 4 (simultaneous)
Special Features: NES Four Score / Satellite compatible
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★

Take to the court in this two-on-two basketball game. The only options available before playing single games are choosing the number of players and one of five difficulties. Movement on the court is peppy, with quick movements from the four players. On offense, the B button passes to the other player, which will be needed any time an opposing player approaches the ball handler, since they'll steal the ball almost every time when close. Inexplicably and strangely, only sometimes the player will randomly jump for a shot attempt with A, and at times the player will fail to shoot at all. There are no slam dunks, and there is little rhyme or reason as to when shots are missed or made. On defense, players can switch players with B, and A acts as both the button to attempt a steal and a block, although that latter function doesn't always work. Graphics are very simplistic, with little detail on the player models or on the court itself. Games seemingly go on forever. There is no music, and sound effects are limited to the crowd when a shot is made, and a beep when the ball is stolen. Magic Johnson's visage only shows up before the game periods, when a violation occurs, or to congratulate the player on a three point shot. A barebones sports game experience is fine if the action is competent and strong, but here the experience is very lacking. Sharing this game with three friends is a great way to lose them.

Reflections: *NBA Jam* this is not. It's fortunate that this isn't the only NES basketball game offering up four player action (*Roundball: 2 on 2 Challenge*). You'd think that with a name like *Fast Break* that you'd have slam dunks or even layups off the backboard, but alas, none of that is to be found. Instead, you get awkward throws towards the net. – PC



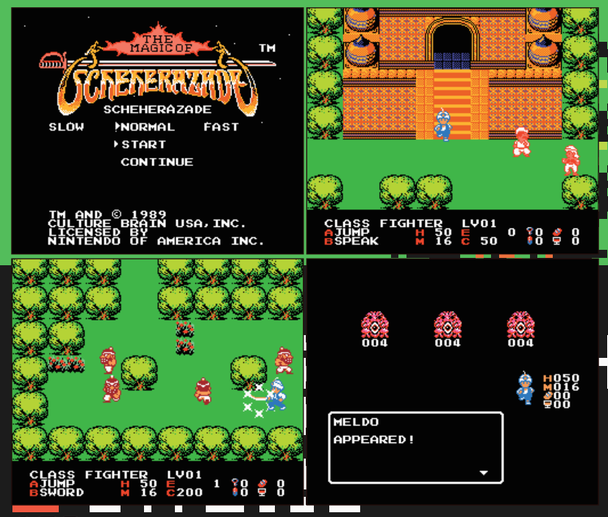
The Magic of Scheherazade

Genre: Action-RPG
Release Date: Dec. 1989
Developer: Culture Brain
Publisher: Culture Brain
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★⯪

As the descendent of the great magician Isfa, you travel through Arabia's multiple worlds and time periods to defeat Sabaron and his demons. Your mission is to save King Feisal and his four daughters, including your sweetheart Scheherazade. The game plays out in a top-down perspective, and as you travel from screen to screen, you attack bandits and monsters with your weapons and spells to gain experience. You can choose one of three classes: Fighter, who wields the sword best; Saint, who uses Magic Boots for safe travel; and Magician, who excels against bosses with his magic rod. Your class also affects character interactions, including shopkeepers' prices. It can be changed at mosques, which also provide passwords and life to dead allies. The 11 allies you gain throughout the game include genies, a robot archeologist, a flying monkey, and more. They not only help you reach new areas and fight bosses, but also assist you with the turn-based battles that randomly occur during the largely action-RPG based gameplay. Coronya, the fairy cat, is especially helpful, as she tells you when to cast Oprin to discover hidden passages and time doors. As you gain levels, you learn spells for attacking, healing, etc., and wise men teach you special magic to use during the frequent solar eclipses. You also acquire bread to restore health, mashroob to restore magic power, magic carpets to return to towns, maps to navigate mazes, etc., and it's easy to assign your choice of spells, weapons, and items to the A and B buttons. This game has an excellent story, delightful characters, varied and exciting gameplay, and an ending that will touch your heart.

Reflections: I have a soft spot for the kitty fairy Coronya. She's always there to advise, to guide through space and time, and to encourage. There's something endearing about her cheery face, her dainty feet, her petite crown, and her star wand. Maybe I'm just a cat lover. Or maybe there's something special about Coronya. You'll have to play the game to find out. – AP

I've stayed away from this title over the years, mainly due to the shame that I can neither spell nor pronounce the name. – PC



Magician

Genre: Action-RPG
Release Date: Feb. 1991
Developer: Eurocom
Publisher: Taxan
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★

In this side-scrolling RPG, players take control of Paul, an apprentice magician from the town of Serenna who embarks on a quest to defeat the evil wizard Abadon, who has purged all wizards from the land of Merlwood. Paul sets out with a limited amount of food and water which steadily decrease as his journey progresses. If his stock runs out, the game will end, so the player must be diligent in keeping up his supply by visiting shops along the way. Players can interact with the environment by pressing UP or DOWN on the D-pad to enter buildings, speak to other characters, or search the immediate area. Experience is gained by completing puzzles and quests, such as delivering a letter or curing a petrified wizard. Paul's spells are comprised of runes that must be pieced together in the proper order on the status screen, allowing him to cast standard battle magics like Fireball and Lightning, along with various Shield spells to defend against attack. Most enemies can be defeated simply by spamming magic spells, thus making the battle system somewhat repetitive. The graphics are average, but the music is lovingly composed and arguably one of the better soundtracks on the NES. Unfortunately, keeping track of hunger is a real issue, as you're far more likely to die of starvation than in battle. It's also possible to miss some key items early on, making the rest of the game impossible to complete.

Reflections: I've never been a fan of games that utilize hunger as a mechanic, thus forcing you to spend your resources to avoid sudden death. It's a slice of real life that probably shouldn't be included in video games, and one that cheapens the overall experience for me. Nevertheless, it might be worth a play for those who don't share the same hang-ups that I do. – JP

MagMax

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Oct. 1988
Developer: Nihon Bussan
Publisher: FCI
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

This horizontal shooter's story has the player tasked to fight off aliens who have taken over the world. Armed with the MagMax ship, the player has to blast enemies and avoid their fire. Players can maneuver from the surface to underground areas and back using portals that appear sporadically. The main gimmick of the game is the ability to pick up three different body parts (legs, head, and wave-beam gun) in order to form a giant robot to fend off attacks. Each piece picked up increases the firepower of MagMax. However, it also leaves the player more open to being hit due to the larger size. If hit, that piece of MagMax will explode, de-powering the ship but saving the player from death as long as there is still at least one ship part remaining. Other than the robot-building mechanic, there isn't much to speak of. The graphics and sounds are simplistic, the enemies are mostly nondescript, and the action is very average.

Reflections: One of my main memories of *MagMax* as a child was seeing a picture of the game in *Nintendo Power* magazine. That picture showed the ship attached to only the legs – a strange, headless robot walking on land. It always disturbed me on some level I could not easily explain at the time. Maybe since I was such a fan of the animated show *Voltron*, seeing that picture somehow made me think of that heroic giant robot decapitated – a horrifying image for a child. Or maybe it was the very simplistic graphics on display that I didn't like. Either one. – PC

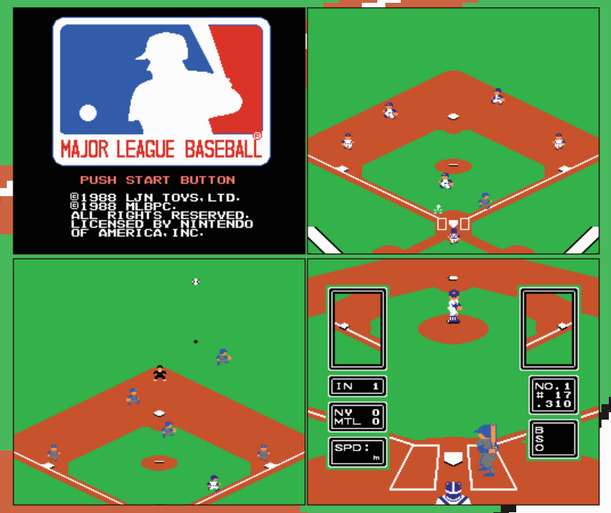
Major League Baseball

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Apr. 1988
Developer: Atlus
Publisher: LJN
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★⯪

This skeleton of a baseball game is dressed up to look slightly more significant, featuring all of the official MLB teams and player numbers. Player names, however, are missing due to the lack of a Player's Association license. Other than team names and colors that come with the official team license, there isn't much on offer. Each game begins with the picking of the lineup which is not only tedious but relatively pointless, as the stats on display never feel like they affect the game meaningfully. Batters can only move up and down in the box and hitting is very awkward. Pitchers have only the barest of options in terms of curve and speed. Fielders exhibit almost zero AI and will simply stand still if the ball hits the field. It would be easier to overlook the lackluster batter and pitcher game if the fielding wasn't an infuriatingly slow mess. There is also a lack of modes in this game that really hurt its ability to hold any interest. There are standard games, more challenging World Series games, and All Star games which allow players to pick players from the different teams in each league. There is no season mode to keep players invested and all of the other modes are simply minor spins on a basic exhibition matchup. While the game is playable, it's never really that fun to do so, and given the huge amount of baseball titles on the system, there is no reason to pay this one any attention.

Reflections: Branding at work. As a kid everyone wanted to play this while something like *Baseball Stars* was often derided for its goofy teams despite the much better, smoother gameplay. It reminds me a lot of people currently who swear Madden is better than – oh, wait. There is no alternate football game because EA bought out the competition when it made them look bad. – IF

This came out roughly the same time that both *Bases Loaded* and *R.B.I. Baseball* did, as all three were the first NES baseball titles after the original glorified NES tech demo that was *Baseball*. You will have many people say that *Bases Loaded* or *R.B.I. Baseball* is their favorite NES baseball title, but no one in their right mind ever selects this game. As such, it was cool to have real players, but that's where the novelty ends. It also doesn't help that I could cook an omelette in the time it takes for the ball to enter the field after the bat strikes it. – PC



Maniac Mansion

Genre: Adventure
Release Date: Sept. 1990
Developer: Lucasfilm Games
Ported by: Realtime Associates
Publisher: Jaleco
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★★

This point-and-click adventure game is among the best in the genre. Dr. Fred Edison has kidnapped cheerleader Sandy, so her boyfriend Dave and six friends go to Fred's mansion to rescue her. The story catalyst may be hackneyed but the rest isn't, featuring absurd humor and scenarios. Finding clues and objects forms the gameplay, which the NES handles using a mouse-like cursor on the D-pad. You don't control characters directly, but instead use menus. The screen looks like a letterboxed movie, with dialogue on top and a list of actions at the bottom. You look for items by moving the cursor and watching to see if an object's name appears (helpful considering the NES' resolution). Your first task is to enter Fred's mansion, so you PULL the doormat, GET the key, and USE it on the door, by selecting commands. The chain of items you'll need to win is more complicated. Since you're trespassing the Edisons will imprison you if they catch you, unless you're friends. The giant talking Green Tentacle of the house will help you if you help him get a record deal. You do this by sending a song to a publisher and getting a contract. How? You'll need items, information, and the right kid. Most of the kids have individual abilities to pass obstacles that open different endings. For example, Razor or Syd can play piano for a music-related solution. The kids have unique theme songs, and the music is fantastic, giving the NES version individuality. However, some players may resent vintage adventure difficulty. By losing key items or characters you can fail without a "game over" saying so. The fun will keep you motivated for a while, though. The game's multiple paths are interesting, and even people who don't like adventure games may enjoy trying it.

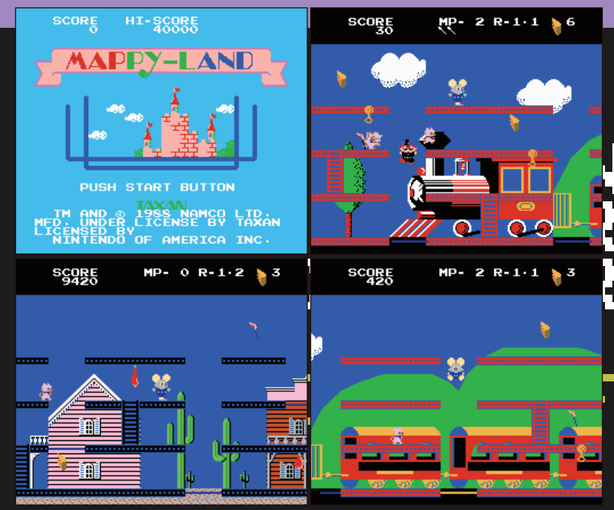
Reflections: *Maniac Mansion* was refreshingly edgy for its time (the NES version was even censored somewhat when it was ported), is available for many platforms, spawned an excellent sequel on the PC (*Day of the Tentacle*), got its own television show, has several fan remakes, and inspired a similar Kickstarter-funded game, *Thimbleweed Park*. The NES port might seem clunky at times, but considering the complex actions and items you work with, using some sort of cursor system really was the best way forward. I think the prime factor to the swift decline of adventure games in the late 1990s was wanton player abuse, some of which appears in *Maniac Mansion*. The cruel practice of allowing players to get permanently stuck with no clue that they have done so is an especially "old-school" and common adventure gaming feature which may have been unique and funny at the time (in a sadistic way, it still is), but has lost novelty since then. Yet after the genre's self-immolation, it is a grand testament to *Maniac Mansion's* significance that it still stands as a memorable classic even now. – KN

Mappy-Land

Genre: Platformer
Release Date: Apr. 1989
Developer: TOSE
Publisher: Taxan
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★

Players must guide Micro Police mouse Mappy through eight levels gathering items for Mapico's birthday while avoiding the evil cat boss Goro and his gang of Mewkies. Completing these multi-tiered, side-scrolling levels will cause them to loop and offer players a greater challenge. In each thematically varied level, Mappy must collect all of a given item, such as cheese in the first loop, to open the exit to the next. Players can get around by using ladders and even zip lines. The most unique element from the original arcade game, the trampolines, find themselves returning. Mappy can't be hurt by the cats while bouncing from one stage tier to another, but too many jumps will cause the trampoline to break. Mappy can also use level specific weapons, such as cannons, ghost guns in the graveyard, or diversionary weapons to render the Mewkies and Goro ineffective. The game has an incredible arcade-game feel and charm to it while adding just a little bit more variety suitable for a home console release. Mappy's adventure just feels more exciting when he's travelling through the Old West and piranha-filled jungles. It's short and not all that challenging early on, but it is simply fun to play through and hits that "one quick game" spot quite nicely.

Reflections: This is one of the first games I ever rented and one that I would continue to rent until I finally bought my own copy as a teenager. It feels like a lot of thought and attention were put into such a simple game. The result is a title that is just more interesting to play than other arcade-style games on the system. It doesn't hurt that *Mappy-Land* contains one of my absolute favorite casts of video game characters. I love Mappy but the cats, crime boss Goro, and the cuter, smaller Mewkies steal the show. – IF



Marble Madness

Genre: Action, Racing
Release Date: Mar. 1989
Developer: Atari Games
Ported by: Rare
Publisher: Milton Bradley
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⋆

Players take control of an anthropomorphized marble and must roll through isometric 3D courses in this unique racing game. Using the D-pad, players control a blue marble (red for player two) and must complete the different courses in the limited amount of time to move on to the next. Time remaining at the finish will be added as bonus time to the next course. The six courses run vertically, and each has a distinct theme, like the Aerial race (which has many drops) and Silly (which runs backwards from bottom to top). They are filled with ramps, corridors, and some even have alternate shortcuts which can shave off time, but are more dangerous to attempt to use. The marble's movement is momentum based, which is somewhat challenging to control but can be mastered with some practice. Using the A button increases the marble's speed, which is necessary to cut down on the race time. However, overuse can result in the player running into problems, such as falling off the course or falling too far from one part of the course onto another and shattering the marble, which wastes precious time. Obstacles and traps such as tight corridors, hammers, vacuums, ice spots, and more will have to be navigated. Enemies that have to be avoided include flying birds, the black Steelie ball that can knock you around, Marble Munchers, and acid that can disintegrate the ball. A magic wand power-up can give your marble extra time, although it appears far too randomly and infrequently. The game is somewhat limited in what it offers, but what's on tap here is something special, with nice graphics and a great soundtrack that both help create a one-of-a-kind game personality. It's a great game for a quick time attack experience, and fun with a friend.

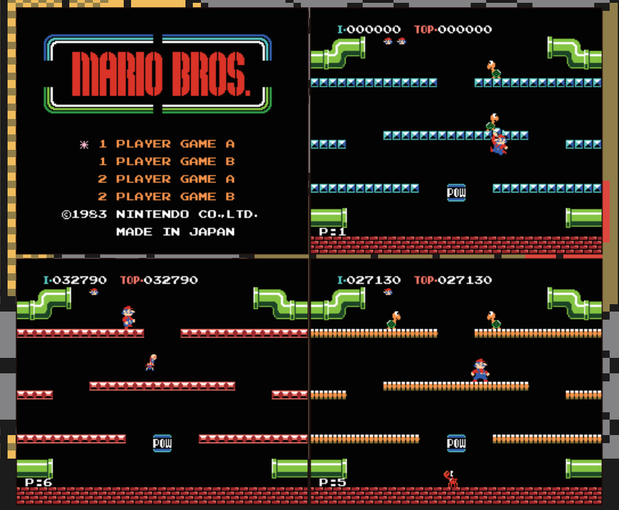
Reflections: This is a special game for sure. The arcade version, which featured colored blue and red trackballs for the players, controls very nicely. I have joked in the past that the arcade version remains the only game in my mind where the main character is also the controller. The arcade cabinet was also notable for being one of the first to feature stereo sound in a video game. An arcade sequel was produced and prototypes placed in some arcades, but it was never fully released to the public. – PC

Mario Bros.

Genre: Platformer
Release Date: June 1986
Developer: Nintendo R&D1
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★⋆

In this single-screen platformer, players control Mario the plumber who must defeat all the critters encountered in each level, such as turtles, crabs, and flies. These creatures arrive from pipes at the top the screen and travel down platforms to the pipes at the bottom, before returning back to the top. Jumping and punching the platform below critters will stun them and flip them onto their backs, and the player will have a limited amount of time to jump onto the platform and kick them to eliminate them. Jumping and punching them again, or failing to kick them within several seconds will result in the enemy getting angry, which means turning a different color and moving faster. Defeated enemies will result in coins to be dropped out of pipes which can be collected for points. If things get too frantic, the player can hit the POW block on the bottom to stun all the enemies at once. Controls are slippery by design: stopping and changing directions isn't done instantly, but is momentum based (as is jumping), which requires some deft handling in order to move around efficiently without falling off platforms or sliding into enemies. If the default slipperiness isn't enough, players have to watch for the Slipice foe, who can cover a platform in ice. It's solid and challenging action, especially when the number of enemies increases and other nuisances such as fireballs show up. A two-player simultaneous mode increases the fun, as brother Luigi can run and bump into Mario, resulting in some frantic action as both vie for points. It's a simple game by design, but it's structurally sound, and perfect for quick, fun, single-screen arcade action.

Reflections: Developed by famed Nintendo developers Shigeru Miyamoto and Gunpei Yokoi, this was the title that firmly established the name Mario for Jumpman (from *Donkey Kong*), the fact that he's a plumber by trade, and his brother Luigi. It also has the prototype Koopa enemies. It's not my favorite arcade game by any means, but it's fun and challenging. The two-player mode is great, however, for messing with your friend. – PC



Mario Is Missing!

Genre: Educational, Platformer
Release Date: July 1993
Developer: Radical Entertainment
Publisher: The Software Toolworks
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★

Bowser has kidnapped Mario, so you, as Luigi, must travel the globe, recovering treasures stolen by the Koopas and returning them to their rightful locations, all while learning world facts. You begin each mission at Bowser's base in Antarctica, which houses 14 pipes, two each behind seven doors. Each pipe can be entered in any order and leads to one of the following destinations: Beijing, Buenos Aires, Cairo, London, Mexico City, Montreal, Moscow, Nairobi, New York City, Paris, Rome, San Francisco, Sydney, or Tokyo. Upon emerging, you can select icons from your Toolbox (located at the top of the screen), such as the Globulator, which displays a world map and allows Yoshi to join you if you know your location. Yoshi is required for leaving each city and sealing its pipe from further Koopa intrusion. To learn where you are, you can use the question mark icon to talk to people as you walk through the city. These folks, which always include a tourist, a woman, a scientist, a policeman, and a kid, will either hint at the locale or directly tell you its name. You may also determine your position by using the map, which displays three famous landmarks per city. Each landmark has an information booth, indicated by a blue "i" icon, which lets you know what item has been stolen. To regain the artifact, check the map for the positions of three Koopas. Stomping them yields the stolen goods, such as the Statue of Liberty's torch or the Bolshoi Ballet's slippers, which you can select with the loot icon and discuss with townspeople, who teach you the item's name, associated dates, purpose, etc. To review these facts, use the Toolbox's computer. Then, take the treasure to its landmark, where you must answer a multiple choice question correctly to return it. When you recover all three of a city's treasures and leave via pipe, you get your score and a password, and after all the globetrotting is over, Bowser presents himself for an extremely easy boss battle. This game can be tediously repetitive, and you don't really even have to talk to anyone to clear a level – you can simply guess at the multiple choice questions, nullifying the game's educational purpose. However, the world facts this game hopes to impart are interesting, and the writing, with its many puns, rhymes, and jokey quiz answers, can be pretty entertaining, making it worth a try.

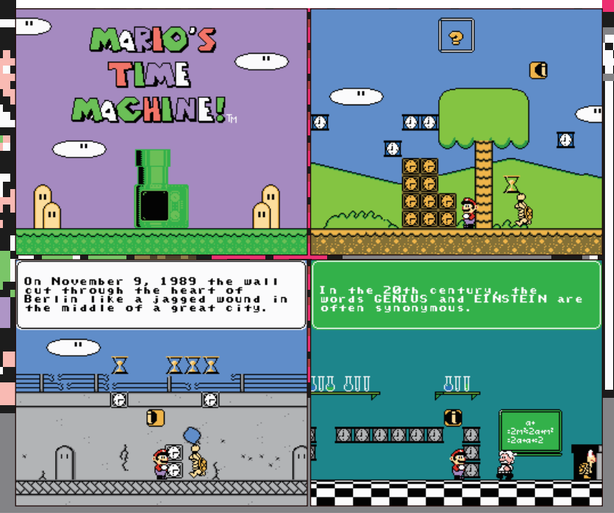
Reflections: Bowser must have taken one too many bops on the head courtesy of the Mario Brothers; his thinking seems a little off. Why else would a reptile, a cold-blooded creature, base his operations out of Antarctica? And why is he stealing our world's treasures anyway? Because he needs the money. Apparently, the hundreds of giant gold coins floating throughout the Mushroom Kingdom just aren't enough to finance his dastardly scheme which, according to the game's manual, is to buy lots and lots of hair dryers and *melt Antarctica*. Y'know, where his castle is. Killer plan, Bowser. – AP

Mario's Time Machine

Genre: Educational, Platformer
Release Date: June 1994
Developer: Radical Entertainment
Publisher: The Software Toolworks
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★

Mario must rescue Yoshi from Bowser and return artifacts to their proper place in time in this educational title. In a museum, Mario can enter one of several doors which leads to a *Mario Bros.* arcade mini-platform game. After defeating three Koopa enemies, the player will receive an artifact and then can jump into a time machine and pick one of multiple time periods to travel to. Once in the new time period, the player must figure out its significance and if the artifact fits that time period by walking around the platforming level and punching the information blocks to reveal historical facts and clues. If the artifact belongs there, the player must find the appropriate spot to place the item via the Start button. If the item doesn't match the level or the location placed is off, the item will be removed and the player must start the entire process all over for that time period. Once all items are placed in all time periods, the player can move onto the finale against Bowser. While providing some nice history lessons and boasting impressive graphics, the mish-mash experience of platforming and learning doesn't quite gel. The platforming is really just a bother (especially since Mario cannot die) and trying to decipher and place the artifacts in the correct time period is a big trial-and-error time waster. This is due to some levels being very particular about where an item is placed, but also the circumstance of how it can be. The frustration of having to regain an artifact again and go through the entire process is only cushioned a bit by a chance to spot famous historical characters with Mario-esque features, such as Shakespeare and Albert Einstein.

Reflections: I was very, very amused the first time I saw the Shakespeare Mario. It could only make me imagine other potential famous Marios: Christopher Columbus Mario (both Italian), Genghis Khan Mario (both have facial hair), or even Jerry Garcia Mario (both experiment with psychotropics). And when I say that the items can only be dropped in very specific locations/circumstances in levels, I mean it. I attempted to drop the apple at Isaac Newton's tree (whoops, historical spoilers!), but it took me a good seven times to find just the right spot on top (I would have thought under would have made more sense). Another annoyance is when there is the historical character walking in the level. If that occurs, it seems like the item can be dropped only while that character is on screen. The problem is that an enemy usually appears right next to them and will kill them within a couple seconds if the player isn't quick enough. Even though you can walk off screen and back and try again, it isn't a task I could picture younger players doing easily. Poor Cleopatra. Ah well, at least they didn't give her Mario's mustache. – PC



Master Chu and the Drunkard Hu

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: 1989
Developer: Joy Van
Publisher: Color Dreams
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★

Take control of the Master and the Drunkard to defeat the Evil Lord in this lackluster action-platformer. Players must find eight Yin Yang symbols in each level to progress, where they will then fight a small boss. Players are armed with a projectile attack (A), and the ability to block projectiles via fan or knife (B). The Yin Yang symbols are hidden from view and only become visible when various objects such as vases, chests, trees, and other ornamental objects are shot with the player's attack. The locations change each game, and blindly shooting numerous objects while contending with the game's insanely frustrating waves of enemies gets old quickly. The baddies range from snakes to caterpillars to flying creatures, but none of them are really identifiable because graphically and animation-wise the game is a mess. The programming isn't good; spiders drop from webs only to destroy themselves when Master Chu is nowhere near them. The inability to duck makes hitting some of these enemies extremely hard, so luckily there is a randomly found power-up that allows angled shots to reach the high volume of low slithering creatures. Jumping in this game is relegated to the UP D-pad button which doesn't feel right and adds to the awkwardness of this already choppily controlling game. Music initially sounds passable until one recognizes that it's literally a seven second loop forever and ever. The blocking of bullets/projectiles with a fan or knife amounts to the extent of cleverness this game contains, but none of this keeps the game from getting boring and frustrating in equal measure.

Reflections: There is nothing fun about systematically scouring a level while running back and forth over the same respawning enemies just to find that one last icon. The enemies have no reaction to attacks and many take far more damage than they ever should. If I can smack a spider to death while shrieking, then a Master of any sort should be able to deal with it swiftly. – IF

Maxi 15

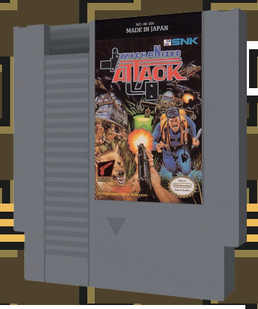
Maxi-15 Pack *(AUS)*
Genre: Compilation
Release Date: 1992
Developer: American Video Entertainment, Color Dreams, et al.
Publisher: American Video Entertainment
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Zapper (optional), Password Save
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Rare
N/R

This compilation cartridge of 15 games consists of 11 previously published separately for the NES by American Video Entertainment, two by America Game Cartridges, and one by Color Dreams: *F-15 City War*, *Puzzle*, *Pyramid*, *Tiles of Fate*, *Krazy Kreatures*, *Double Strike*, *Dudes with Attitude*, *Venice Beach Volleyball*, *Deathbots*, *Rad Racket*, *Chiller*, *Solitaire*, *Menace Beach*, and *Shockwave* (please see individual game reviews for more details on each). The only unique title included is *Stakk'M*, a snoozer of a puzzle game where players have to stack at least three similarly numbered falling blocks (diamonds, hearts, or Arabic numerals) horizontally, vertically, or diagonally, dependent upon the stage's objective. Wild card tiles are available and you can optionally see the next tile. It's a simple title and isn't exactly inspiring. At the end of the day, if you're in the market for a set of American Video Entertainment and other unlicensed NES game titles in one package, then this multicart is for you!

Reflections: Upon powering on the game, an image shows a wanderer at the entrance of the "MAXIVISION" castle, home of a fierce dragon, skeleton warriors, and below-average unlicensed games. In reality, that title screen image of the castle entrance and the boy was derived from the "MaxiVision Power Video Challenge," a bizarre infomercial hosted by wrestler Hulk Hogan and with appearances by Honky Tonk Man, "Mr. Wonderful" Paul Orndorff, and Koko B. Ware. It apparently aired on television only once, and was produced to promote the *MaxiVision*, a prototype of the *Maxi 15* that boasted 30 games, not 15. It was sold via a 1-800 telephone number for "3 simple payments of $49.95 plus s/h." Obviously, it was decided by AVE to cut down the number of games on the cart, probably for cost reasons. I'm not sure if anyone who purchased one or more of the individual games included on *Maxi 15* at the full retail price would have been angry when seeing this released, since they most likely broke into hysterics knowing full well that even 50 AVE and Color Dreams games on one cartridge wouldn't be a good bargain at any price. – PC

Mechanized Attack

Genre: Shooting Gallery
Release Date: June 1990
Developer: SNK
Publisher: SNK
Players: 1
Special Features: Zapper (optional)
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★



This basic shooting gallery war game asks players to eliminate the soldiers, robots, helicopters and more as they appear on a scrolling screen from a first-person perspective. There is a limited amount of machine gun ammo and grenades that can be replenished by shooting the proper icons on screen. The waves of enemies move quickly, but the game feels fair and lets one get by on instinct as opposed to memorization, at least for a while. The game has a simple look to it, but the graphics are certainly not unpleasant and are fairly uniform. Multiple stage types from land, sea, caves, forests, and even air battles keep things varied. Some aspects, like a large battleship with multiple gun turrets, make for nice centerpieces to the action as players dismantle the various gun turrets and targets and try to manage the other enemies on screen at the same time. The game may be played with either the controller or the Zapper, but it actually plays just fine with the controller, since the Zapper lacks the ability for rapid fire. It's all-around decent arcade-style fun.

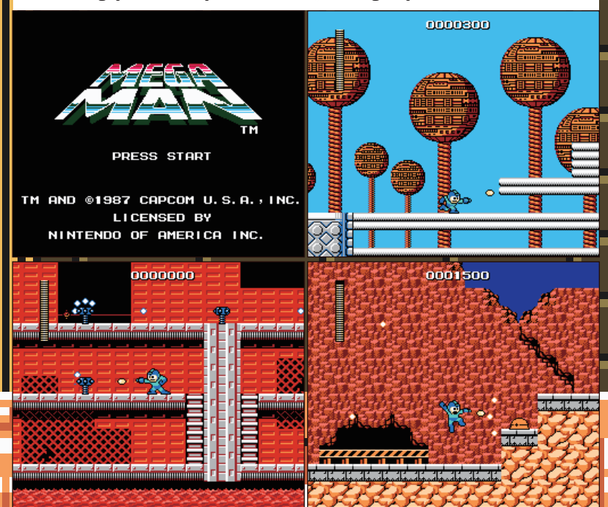
Reflections: These types of games rarely feel fair to me, especially on home consoles. This stands out as one that plays decently with a controller, and the difficulty doesn't ramp up too quickly, either. Later levels do run into problems with ammo scarcity, which either makes the game more tense and exciting or boring depending on your preference. – IF

Mega Man

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Dec. 1987
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★⯪

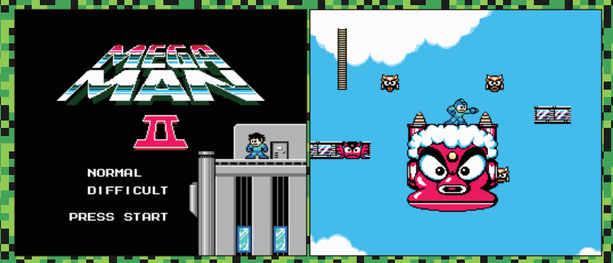
As Mega Man, a human-like robot created by kindly Dr. Wright (also known as Dr. Light), you must defeat six of the good doctor's robots that were reprogrammed by the evil Dr. Wily. Upon starting, the stage selection menu shows a ring of icons depicting your foes: Bomb Man, Cut Man, Elec Man, Fire Man, Guts Man, and Ice Man. When defeated, each one of these bosses supplements Mega Man's arsenal (initially just his arm cannon) with a unique weapon. Every boss is especially susceptible to another boss's weapon, so figuring out the best order to approach them is a significant aspect of the game. The weapons, equipped with individual power meters, are also useful in general, as they allow Mega Man to move giant blocks, freeze enemies, fire in three directions, etc. These abilities, plus skillful jumping and dodging, are necessary for tackling the levels, some of which particularly suit their respective rulers. For example, Ice Man's stage is slippery, Fire Man's domain is full of flames and lava, Elec Man's realm has timed lightning bolts, etc. You will also encounter dropping platforms, disappearing/reappearing blocks, deadly spikes, wide chasms, etc. Most of the robotic enemies Mega Man comes across are not unique to any one stage, but they are different enough to keep him on his toes. Defeating a flying googly eyed face, a hopping flea, a huge stomping robot, or another enemy yields points and might also bestow item pick-ups to slightly/greatly refill Mega Man's health/weapons meters. Additionally, Mega Man can obtain extra lives (represented by an image of his face) and has unlimited continues. When all six robot bosses are defeated, Mega Man will enter Dr. Wily's levels where he'll face new bosses, have rematches with the old ones, battle a Mega Man clone, and square off with Wily himself. With its admirable protagonist, dastardly villain, challenging enemies, acquirable weapons, and excellent music, this game laid the groundwork for one of the most beloved series ever.

Reflections: This is the game that introduced characters and concepts so great that they carried on through five more NES titles. It gave us our beloved, Astro Boy-like Blue Bomber, treated us to awesome, unforgettable music, and showed us that trial, error, and persistence are the keys to success. Beginning with this title, our ambitions rode on the barrel of the Mega Buster, our skills and weapon sets waxed with each hard-won victory, and our very mouths gaped in wonder, just like Mega Man's, as we leapt and blasted our way to triumph. This game also established a sinister through line that slinked its way across the series: Dr. Wily. Wily, with his thirst for world domination, was behind every devious scheme, and his villainous obstinance put him at odds with our hero time and time again. But at least it proved one thing: you *can* stay mad forever, as long as you're a scientist. – AP



Mega Man 2

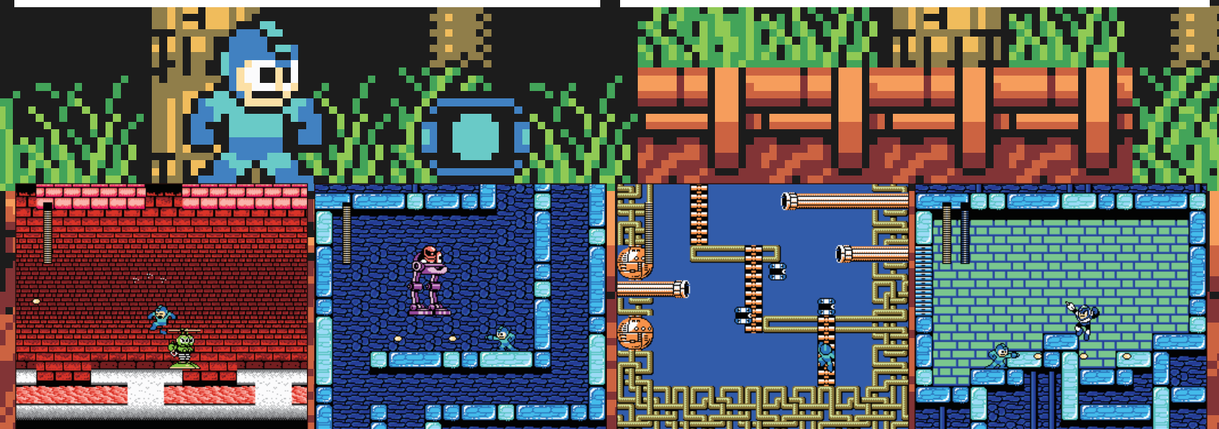
Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: June 1989
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★★★



As Mega Man, the benevolent robot created by Dr. Light, you must destroy eight enemy robot bosses before entering the multi-stage, skull-shaped lair of their inventor, the nefarious Dr. Wily. After choosing the difficulty setting, you may enter a password or proceed to the level select screen that consists of nine icons, eight of which depict the bosses: Air Man, Bubble Man, Crash Man, Flash Man, Heat Man, Metal Man, Quick Man, and Wood Man. The ninth, central square represents Dr. Wily and cannot be chosen. The robot bosses can be approached in any order, with a caveat: when one is beaten, Mega Man, who is initially equipped only with his arm cannon, receives a themed weapon from the fallen foe (e.g., Air Man's Air Shooter, Wood Man's Leaf Shield, Heat Man's Atomic Fire, etc.). Not only are these useful during levels, but also each boss is particularly vulnerable to another boss's weapon, so part of the game's challenge is discovering the optimum order in which to tackle the stages. The levels themselves generally evoke their various masters: Air Man's sky-high realm is full of clouds to ride, Metal Man's level has moving gears and conveyor belts, Bubble Man's domain is largely underwater, which greatly alters Mega Man's jump, etc. Each stage presents many obstacles, including moving/dropping/disappearing platforms, walls destructible only by the Crash Bomber, and instantly deadly spikes and lava. Fortunately, after certain levels, Dr. Light awards you with special items that allow you to create your own various platforms. Each level also has a variety of respawning robotic enemies, ranging from carrot-chucking rabbits to shrimp-spitting giant fish. Taking a hit knocks Mega Man back but grants temporary invincibility. Defeating enemies yields energy pellets/energy balls that replenish health, small/large weapon energy icons that can refill acquired weapons' power meters, and rarely, extra lives. Mega Man can also find extra lives, as well as energy tanks, which you can store and use to refill his health meter at will. If you lose all lives, you can obtain a password, which is a five-by-five grid of blank squares and red dots. The variety of enemies, obstacles, and bosses in this game is incredibly engaging and will test both your reflexes and your memorization skills. Complemented by one of the best soundtracks on the system, this is an undeniable classic.

Reflections: I adore Mega Man and strongly believe that *Mega Man 2* is one of the brightest jewels, both in the entire NES library and in my own childhood game collection. It was the only entry from the series I had growing up, but it fostered a lifelong love. I remember struggling with my brother in Quick Man's stage against those room-spanning beams of instant death, and the satisfaction of *finally* getting past them – it was so difficult then, but so worth it for the feeling of accomplishment. That sense of progression, of watching Mega Man's very being light up with the colors of each victory captivated me and kept me going long after frustration with the game's worthy challenge would have ground my enthusiasm to dust. Not only that, but the music! It riveted me, energized me, perhaps even emboldened me to take that long leap over a perilous pitfall, or to fire that crucial last shot, even though my life was low and my chances seemed so slight. I still dance to it in my seat when I play, and carry it with me in my mind. But I carry something more than the music and the memories, something in my heart. To me, Mega Man is not just a video game character: he is an emblem of dedication. He willingly accepts difficult challenges, and the fruits of his efforts enable him to go further and do more, all while retaining purity of purpose. It is an ideal I can only hope to strive for, in whatever limited way I am able. For that, my love of Mega Man is truly rock solid.

Though he's affectionately known as the Blue Bomber, Mega Man is actually a connoisseur of many colors. Me, I put on a brown sock and a green sock and I'm good for the whole day. But that simply won't do for Mega Man. To coordinate with each weapon *du jour*, he's got a kaleidoscope of colors up his sleeve, not to mention around his head, down his boots, and on his over-undies. When brandishing the Metal Blade, he dons Antique Gold and Tarnished Bronze, while Coral and Cream complement his Crash Bomber. Naturally, he accentuates his Leaf Shield with Forest Green, and Graphite for the Bubble Lead makes sense if you ignore pronunciation. Orchid Purple and Lilac might seem to be oddly floral choices to pair with Flash Man's weapon, but having a Time Stopper does mean he's in charge of the past, the present, and the Fuchsia. However, I'm having a hard time tickling out a reason for his Quick Man weapon color. Look, Mega Man. Silver is quick. Even Bisque is quick. So how come you've chosen Cotton Candy as the signature hue for your Quick Boomerang? Quick Man didn't – he sports Racing Red and Lightning Yellow, appropriate to his standing as a speedster. But swaddling yourself in Pepto-Bismol Pink doesn't spell "fast," unless you add "relief from indigestion." – AP

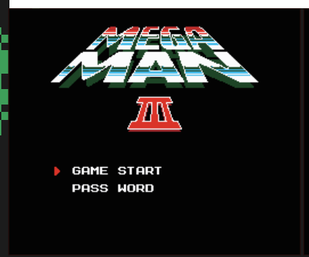


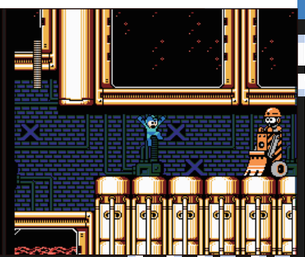
Mega Man 3

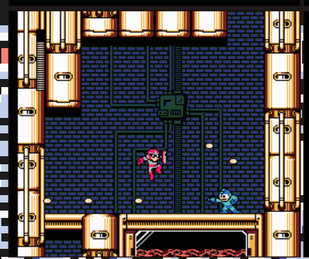
Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Nov. 1990
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★½

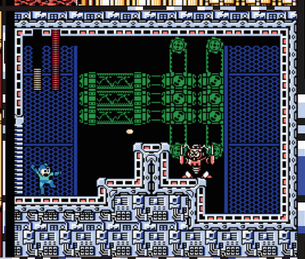
Mega Man returns to level his arm cannon at eight enemy Robot Masters before setting his sights on Dr. Wily. The level select screen again features each of the adversaries: Gemini Man, Hard Man, Magnet Man, Needle Man, Shadow Man, Snake Man, Spark Man, and Top Man. When Mega Man defeats one, he gains that opponent's weapon, such as the Spark Shock, Gemini Laser, Hard Knuckle, etc. Each acquired weapon has its own refillable power meter and is particularly strong against another Master, so it behooves you to figure out each boss's weakness and select levels accordingly. The stages contain elements that reflect their respective bosses: Snake Man's den is green and scaly, Shadow Man's lair periodically plunges you into darkness, Needle Man's realm sticks with retractable spikes, etc. You will encounter some robotic enemies that are unique to their stages (e.g., Top Man's yarn-and-flea-flinging cats or Magnet Man's flying magnets); others, such as bulldozers and dragonflies, appear in multiple levels. Additionally, Proto Man, Mega Man's brother, will challenge you in the middle of a few levels before disappearing. Fortunately, Mega Man has a new move: the slide, which not only allows him to enter narrow passageways and zoom through levels, but also is indispensable for dodging enemy/boss attacks. He also has a new companion: Rush, his robot dog, who initially comes equipped with a coil for high jumps, but will eventually get the ability to turn into a jet and submarine. These additions help you through the eight original levels, four revamped versions of previous levels that contain all eight of *Mega Man 2*'s robot bosses, and the multiple stages of Wily's skeletal castle. Life/weapon-replenishing power-ups, extra lives, energy tanks that can be used to refill health at any time, and surprise boxes that can contain any of these also aid your progress. This game tweaks the established series formula with the excellent inclusions of Rush, Proto Man, and the slide, but the bedrock is largely unchanged: great music, great enemies, and great gameplay.

Reflections: I'm kind of jealous of Proto Man, and not just for his killer sense of style (he should go by Prada Man with the way he works that scarf and shades combo). He's also a complex, conflicted character who's independent to a fault. These details leave me intrigued, yet not envious. What I want is his whistle. How cool would it be to have a signature song to play everywhere you go, heralding your awesome arrival? Of course, this type of fanfare is probably better in theory than in practice. I got the dirtiest of looks and the nastiest of shushes when I tried it. It's probably only because my chosen theme of "Sunshine, Lollipops, and Rainbows" just isn't as hip as Proto Man's bluesy riff. Then again, maybe I should have waited until the movie was over. – AP







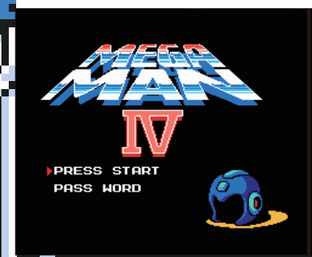


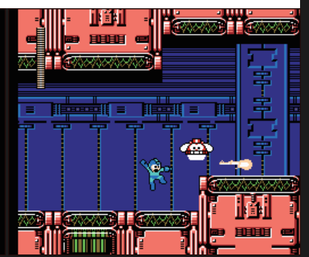
Mega Man 4

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Jan. 1992
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★

Robotic Mega Man must face the villainous Dr. Cossack and his robot minions in this sequel. Mega Man uses his trusty Mega Buster to blast enemies in the side-scrolling, platforming levels. This time out the Buster can be charged by holding B for a much more powerful blast. Mega Man can jump and also slide around quickly via A + DOWN. There is also the Rush Coil, Mega Man's robotic dog assistant, to help jump and reach higher areas and platforms. There are eight selectable stages, each with their own theme and Robot Master boss: Toad Man, Pharaoh Man, Bright Man, Drill Man, Dive Man, Ring Man, Dust Man, and Skull Man. Each stage has its own platforms, pitfalls, and traps to contend with, as well as stage-specific robot enemies which are nicely designed. Some defeated enemies will drop power-ups to help refill the life meter, the special weapons/items, or sometimes an extra life. Each relatively short stage consists of horizontal and connecting vertical sections (via ladders or falling), all leading up to the encounter with the Robot Master. Success depends on recognizing the Robot Master's attack and movement patterns and counter-attacking. Defeating each Master will result in gaining that boss's weapon (selectable via menu), the Rush Marine (submarine for sea levels), or the Rush Jet (for flying around). These weapons and items all have their own energy meter, but can be replenished in levels by the aforementioned item drops. Unfortunately, the majority of acquired weapons are mostly useless (Dust Crusher may be the best), with the player being able to rely on the charged Mega Buster to inflict heavy damage on standard enemies and Robot Masters alike. While some are overly difficult, some Robot Masters, like Toad Man, are a breeze. The levels themselves are fairly easy, with the biggest danger usually being falling into pits/spikes when being hit by an enemy. The difficulty imbalance comes to a head when facing the castle levels, with the player having to face several new bosses in succession, including having to face all Robot Masters again – in a row! Fortunately, collecting storable energy tanks throughout the game can help for such situations. The outstanding controls, graphics, sounds, and music all return here, and nice extras like the balloon adapter and wire adapter help keep the series moving along.

Reflections: The charged Mega Buster is hit and miss, as its overreliance slows the game down in places. The lack of truly needing the Robot Masters' weapons is a shame, eliminating the fun of using them. The twist here (SPOILERS!) is that Dr. Cossack is actually being controlled by Dr. Wily – the true villain of the game. This annoyed me when I encountered it, since it would have been nice to have a different villain for a change. Even the Super Mario series managed to not use Bowser for a sequel! Okay, it was all a dream, but still! – PC



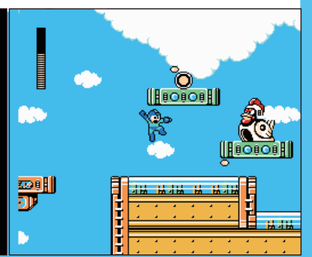


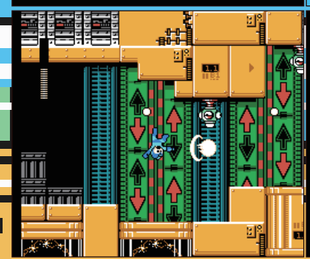
Mega Man 5

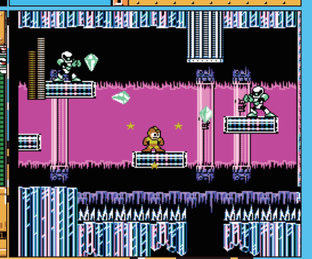
Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Dec. 1992
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★

Ruling cruel robots, creating chaos, and abducting Dr. Light? Despite those snazzy shades, Proto Man is totally not being cool – or so it would seem. Fortunately, as his little blue ro-bro, Mega Man, you're fast on the scene to ferret out facts and foes alike by facing eight Robot Masters: Charge Man, Crystal Man, Gravity Man, Gyro Man, Napalm Man, Star Man, Stone Man, and Wave Man. Each waits in his own selectable side-scrolling stage, wielding an acquirable weapon that's particularly potent against one of his baddie brethren. This sounds suspiciously like a setup straight from the mind of a certain mad scientist, but that's no matter, as these and the later lair levels are laced with engaging music and laden with intriguing hazards. Riding rising bubbles, sidestepping asteroids, and sticking to ceilings are just some of the challenges made simpler by a generous supply of 1-ups, gained by felling ferrous felons with your chargeable Mega Buster. Mechanical turrets, stompers, tigers, etc. may also drop replenishing energy pellets or weapon capsules, but here's hoping that your friend Flip-Top the "cybernetic suitcase" does you one better by bestowing storable energy tanks when he shows up. If not, search stages for them, the rare mega tank, and the letters in "MEGA MAN V." Spelling the latter summons Beat, your bulbous bird buddy, who adds another attack to your arsenal. Naturally, he's not your only animal assistant; Rush the robot dog returns to help with heights and chasms (also crossable with the Super Arrow). Although it's a relatively easy installment, this game delights with detailed backgrounds and varied obstacles, maintaining the series' integrity even as it impugns that of one of its stars.

Reflections: Proto Man's purported behavior in this title truly isn't Proto-typical – at least, it isn't for him, but it *is* quite expected for a particular individual with a penchant for screeching saucers and arching eyebrows. Hmm… will I lower the shades and remove the gauzy scarf that barely conceals the actual villain masterminding this sinister plot? Will I? I will! WILY! Wily's the one behind it all, as if you couldn't guess from my not-so-subtle insinuations (and from four previous games). He attempts to use an imposter, Dark Man, to frame Mega Man's elder sibling, and it's incredibly satisfying when the real Proto Man's signature whistle exposes the phony's flimsy warble. After all, anyone can sing the blues, but only Proto Man *is* Blues. – AP





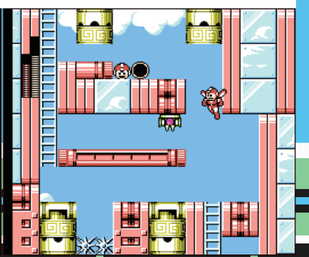


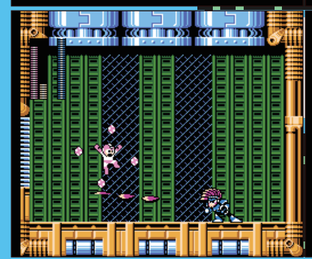
Mega Man 6

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Mar. 1994
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★

An insidious villain with Einstein hair, evil ambitions, and a fondness for octets is wreaking havoc in 20XX. (It's Dr. Wily again, right?) Oh no, this time it's Mr. X who's absconded with eight potent robots from around the globe. (But he's just Wily with a fake beard and a black cloak.) Shh! Play along!…er, as Mega Man, the perennial power-absorbing hero! In this sixth installment to the side-scrolling series, you must fight each filched Robot Master, absorbing his abilities to use against another especially susceptible foe. These include Blizzard Man, Centaur Man, Flame Man, Knight Man, Plant Man, Tomahawk Man, Wind Man, and Yamato Man. The big twist (much bigger than Mr. X's true identity) is that half of their personalized levels have two boss rooms, one of which awards both a trademark weapon and a lettered circuit plate (all four are required for acquiring avian ally Beat). Hints abound to indicate these special stages, from blanks on the level select screen to altered color palettes upon re-entry, but accessing the rooms is a Rush job. Using power adaptors retrieved from adversaries, you can join with that canine companion to become either Power Mega Man, who busts obstructions with punches, or Jet Mega Man, who reaches new heights. These novel skills make the castle, fortress, ancient city, and other environments engaging to explore, as do enemies including robotic cowboys, bugs, and pandas. These baddies and your pal Flip-Top occasionally drop restorative items, but be sure to seek energy tanks and the Energy Balancer; the latter accessory funnels replenishing capsules to your most depleted weapon without you having to arm it. Of course, if you're not in any Rush, you can charge your Mega Buster and slide through narrow spots as scintillating music fills the air of this enjoyable quest against Mr. (Dr.) X (Wily)!

Reflections: Proto Man only ekes out a teensy cameo here, but even without his crimson coolness, you'll still be seeing red! Both Jet and Power Mega Man assume Rush's scarlet color scheme, and although it's tempting to skip the sequences that play *every single time* you select these forms, they're worth watching at least once to see the pup morph into mighty shoulder pads or a jaunty jetpack. These abilities return in *Mega Man 7* (combined into the Super Adaptor) – but you have to take flight to the SNES. – AP



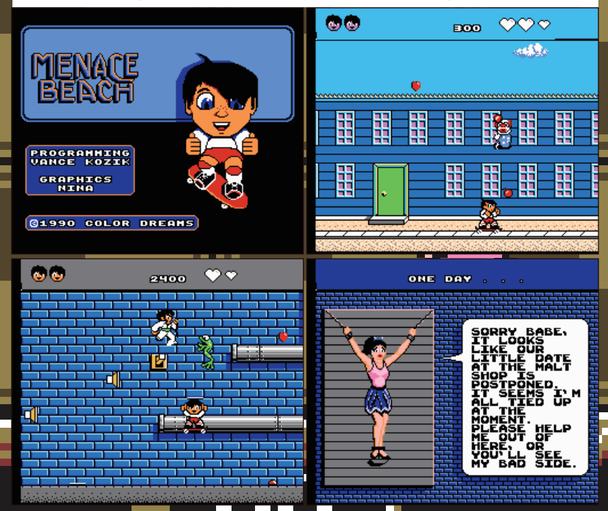


Menace Beach

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: 1990
Developer: Color Dreams
Publisher: Color Dreams
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Very Rare
★

Scooter's girlfriend has been kidnapped by Demon Dan, and it's up to the player to help rescue her by traversing beach towns, piers, and sewers. Scooter travels on a skateboard, which is a little slippery in controlling, as it's somewhat momentum based. When jumping, hitting A in the air will slightly hop the board, extending the length of time of jumps. Enemies such as ninjas, clowns dropping balloons, tough beach guys, frogs, birds, sumo wrestlers, and Elvis impersonators (!) must be dealt with. Scooter is armed with a short punch to attack, as well as a spinning attack while jumping. The hit detection for connecting with an enemy is very poor, as it seems almost random whether or not damage is done to them or to the player. The player has a few hearts as a life meter but can find more in levels to replenish, although too few are scattered around. Some objects are thrown at the player, such as wrenches, bombs, and bottles. They may be picked up and thrown at enemies, and in the case of the sumo wrestler, the bomb is the only way to defeat them. Gameplay usually consists of traveling until coming to an enemy or pair that must be defeated before moving on. In between levels, cutscenes of your chained girlfriend with gradually rotting clothing (!) can be viewed, as she chastises you for not being quicker in saving her. The poor hit detection and subpar controls make it a chore to play through in the pier and beach town levels, but they pale in comparison to the horrible sewer sections. These contain landmines, light switches that blacken the level, and annoying vertical and horizontal springs that shoot the player around the screen and sometimes into water pits. The controls are insufficient to handle such platforming elements without much trial and error and suffering. While there is some interesting sprite work going on here, and some fun and thought went into the story and enemy design, the only menace encountered is attempting to play.

Reflections: My beach vacations to Seaside Heights were never like this. One of the startling things about the game to me, besides the fact that an NES game shows a chained-up girl with rotting clothes, is the fact that while Scooter's girlfriend appears to be a teenager, Scooter himself appears to be about nine years old. This game would be remade as *Sunday Funday*, so feel free to skip to the "S" section now to read that carbon copy review, or else continue on to read about Ian Ferguson's take on an uncommon action game! – PC

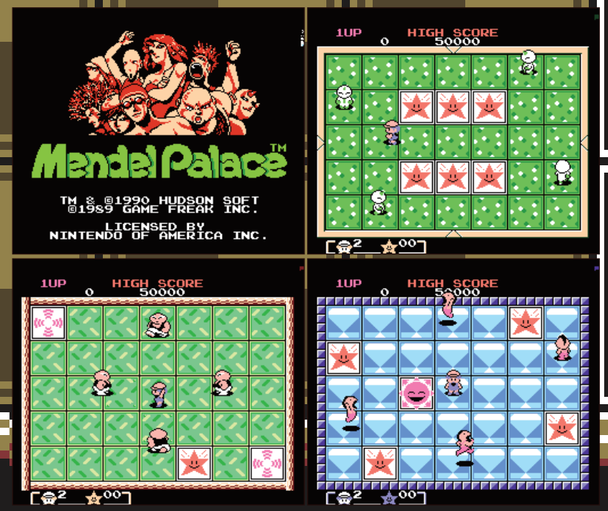


Mendel Palace

Genre: Action
Release Date: Oct. 1990
Developer: Game Freak
Publisher: Hudson Soft
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★

Help Bon-Bon rescue Princess Candy in this colorful and odd single-screen action game. Players work through a series of overhead levels where they must destroy all enemies before they may proceed. The floors of each level are covered in tiles that are actually stacks of cards. By attacking on a tile, the player will shuffle that spot in the direction they are facing, and if any enemies are in the way, they will be knocked back. Sending them into walls defeats them, and a key strategy in the game is figuring out the quickest way to do so. Certain spots will reveal cards that will shuffle every card in the row and column it resides in, which makes it a very effective tool for defeating a number of enemies if timed properly. Various other unique icons can be found that will flip all tiles in a room, start a bonus stage, grant lives, and other useful actions. The enemies themselves are varied as well and start with mindless drones, but they quickly get trickier with ones that can swim amongst the cards and have a more erratic pattern, like mimics that will try to copy your moves, and even aggressive enemies that can flip tiles back at the player. Graphically, every level is laid out the same, but changing colors for the card backs and different enemies for each world keep the variety up so it never really gets visually boring. Music is forgettable but not bad. It's blippy and happy and fits the game, but these tunes are unlikely to get stuck in anyone's head. Some overly precise collision for flipping tiles can occasionally cause frustration, but this is a very fun and worthwhile title that is certainly unlike anything else.

Reflections: *Mendel Palace* was a random pick up that I grabbed in my early days of collecting. While the label did nothing to clarify what the game was about, I was at least expecting some sort of action or adventure. What I got was a boring-looking single-screen game about shuffling floor tiles made of cards. Luckily, this first game by Game Freak ended up being just as fun, unique, and charming as the later games they became renowned for – the *Pokémon* series. Play this to see their humble beginning. – IF

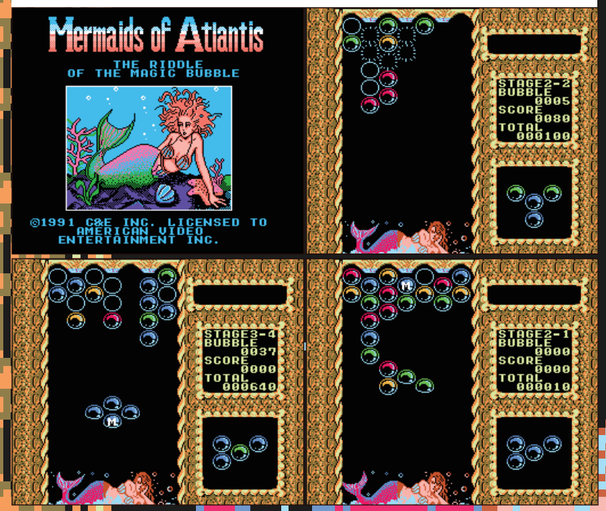


Mermaids of Atlantis

Genre: Puzzle
Release Date: 1991
Developer: Computer & Entertainment
Publisher: American Video Entertainment
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★⋆

This puzzle game tasks the player to match up similarly colored bubbles. In a rectangular tank, shapes of four bubbles containing up to four different colors (green, blue, red, and gold) will rise up to the top of the tank. Players can maneuver the bubbles and also flip the shape (and colors) horizontally with B and vertically with A. The shapes will collect and fill in when they reach the other bubbles at the top. When four of the same colored bubbles connect, the bubbles will disappear and any bubbles beneath will move up in the stack, which can result in combo eliminations. Play moves on to the next, faster level after a certain number of bubbles are eliminated. The game ends when the bubbles collect and fill to the bottom of the tank (although limited continues are available to try again). The flipping of the bubble patterns takes some getting used to, but after a while gets easier. What doesn't get easier, though, is finding places to put useless pieces, such as the "Y" shape with multiple colors, which unless a great opportunity is already there, can be hard to place. This frustration can be somewhat alleviated by the game showing you what the next piece will be, however. The puzzle action is sound, but the room for error is very low, with little chance to recover if a few bubbles are misplaced. Fortunately, the game remedies this a bit in the form of a random glowing bubble piece, which will transform all the bubbles in its direct radius to the same color. There is also the MAGIC power-up. Randomly, some of the colored bubbles in a shape will contain one of the letters of the word "magic." If that bubble is eliminated, that letter will appear on the top right of the screen, and if "magic" is spelled out entirely, it will give the player the ability to eliminate a chunk of bubbles on the screen at any time by pressing B + DOWN to activate it. This unique spin on the puzzle genre does the best it can with the concept and includes some nice options, such as choosing the starting stage and level. It even has a nice two-player mode. There's some fun here, even with the gameplay limitations.

Reflections: This is the nonnude version of *Bubble Bath Babes* in the United States. In terms of gameplay, they are identical, except that this version has more options and a lack of female breasts. The back of the box denotes the plot as Emperor O-Dinten using the patented Dura-Bubble to profit by "controlling all the games under the sea." The player is tasked to restore "the freedom to have fun," a paper-thin analogy of Nintendo trying to control the games released on the NES by using the lockout chip and dissuading unlicensed game publishers. AVE's firing direct shots at Nintendo here – it's too bad just about no one saw it happen. – PC



Metal Fighter

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: 1989
Developer: Joy Van
Publisher: Color Dreams
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★

Player take control of the MCS-920 (a chicken-shaped robot) in this side-scrolling shooter. Players can fly and aim forward as well as backwards, which makes it a little different from most shooters where you're always facing one direction. Powering up the main weapon as a fireball is also possible by holding down B. Power-ups start with one that enables your hopping robot to fly, and others increase the speed of your ship. There are also power-ups for more powerful weapons, such as rapid fire, a short-ranged projectile shield, bouncing laser, and an attached drone that fires. The power-ups are not automatically gained, however. When the letter icon for the power-up is touched, the player will enter into a mini-game mode where they have to destroy the ship at the other side of the screen to escape the mode and gain the power-up. The caveat though is that the player's robot can still be damaged or destroyed during this mini-game. It's unnecessary and totally undermines the flow of the game. Other than that departure from standard shooters, the game is alright but doesn't stand out in any real way, with average presentation, boring enemy design, ho-hum bosses, and nothing truly memorable about the experience in the least.

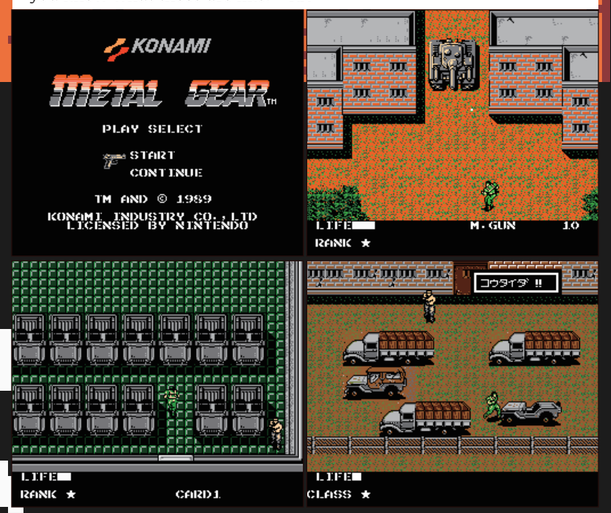
Reflections: As underwhelming as *Metal Fighter* is, at least it's not a disaster like some of the other Color Dreams games. I'm not sure if that's a positive or not. – PC

Metal Gear

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: June 1988
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Ultra Games
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⯪

In this influential action-adventure game emphathizing stealth over offense, you, Solid Snake, must infiltrate terrorist strongholds to destroy their superweapon Metal Gear. The settings are jungles and military warehouses, and enemies include soldiers, hounds, tanks, etc. The map is divided into static screens in overhead view (alas, without scrolling). Status information is at the bottom of the screen, showing life, rank, equipped items, and incoming call notifications. Start pauses, and select opens menus for items, weapons, and the transceiver, which makes and receives calls to Snake's "boss." Each screen is like a little puzzle where you must carefully navigate to the next rooms, continually avoiding soldiers and traps. Attacking may either be effective or a deadly mistake. It's challenging, involving preparation and exploration, but frustratingly, what you must do isn't always obvious. You begin without weapons or lives, but there are infinite continues and a password system, and if you rescue hostages, your rank, vitality, and inventory increase (harming hostages lowers these). You'll need to search for helpful items like rations that restore health, and required key items, like gas masks or cards that unlock doors. You can also find weapons – various guns, rocket launchers, explosives, and more. Enemy AI is relatively sophisticated: they're easier to sneak past or defeat when they're not facing you, their bullets track towards you, and if you attack in sight of others, they'll retaliate. Snake doesn't have much recovery time when hit, so enemies can quickly kill you. It's a realistic approach to player vitality, appropriate for the tone and design. Backgrounds and characters are detailed and complement the mature attitude. The music is good and changes at appropriate moments, like when you're spotted. Although there are text translation errors, they're entertainingly memorable, like the game itself.

Reflections: At the time of *Metal Gear*'s release, most Americans didn't know that it was a port of a game for the MSX home computer platform. *Metal Gear* Creator Hideo Kojima did not approve of the Famicom/NES version, since it included different sequence of events and scenes while omitting others. The most inexplicable of these changes was replacing the titular Metal Gear robot with a giant computer console. The existence of the original game is better known today, so people can try the MSX version for themselves. But do the differences between the versions really matter? Kojima's rejection of the NES port is in itself a statement of his intent as an author, and an expression that designing video games is an art. In other words, he cared. There are games in this book made by people who didn't, and you know what those are like. – KN

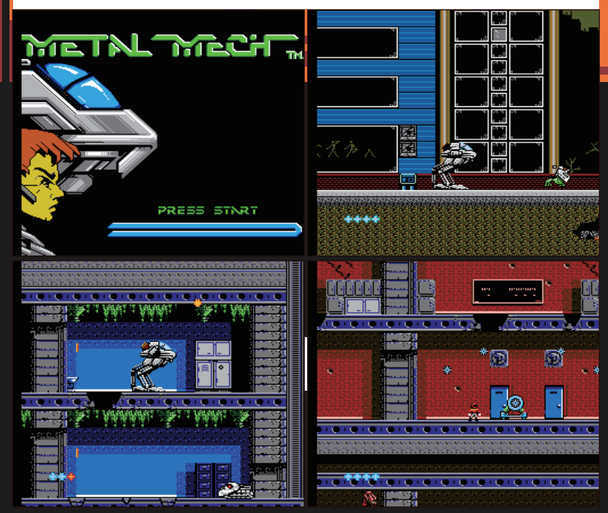


Metal Mech: Man & Machine

Genre: Action, Shooter
Release Date: Mar. 1991
Developer: Sculptured Software
Publisher: Jaleco
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

Pilot Tony Martin must take down the hybrid alien/robot invaders in this free-roaming action title. Players will begin in their three-legged mech assault vehicle and traverse levels, taking on enemy robots, flying vehicles, stationary guns/turrets, and tanks, all while firing back with a turret gun that the player can rotate via the control pad to fire forward, at angles, and straight up. Limited cluster bombs are also available. The Mech walks slowly, but is heavily armored, and can jump to crush certain enemies. The objective of the levels is to find the "K" (key icon) – needed to reach the end of the level and advance. Stages are nonlinear and can split off in other directions via ladders, elevators, etc. To reach many parts of them, players must eject Tony from the Mech via menu or SELECT + A button combination. Once outside the vehicle, Tony can travel along more quickly, jump, and fire in eight directions with an underpowered pistol. He also has the ability to explore where the Mech cannot by climbing ladders, fences, and other objects, and entering small passages/tunnels. Tony cannot take a lot of damage, so players must be more careful when moving around. This is the precarious balance the game presents. Being outside the Mech is the only way for Tony to collect the key and various items by destroying objects in the levels to reveal them. These include attack power-ups for both the Mech and Tony, replenishments for their separate health bars, and selectable attack upgrades for the Mech. These are essential for getting past the swarm of enemies, many of which will respawn, meaning a constant, fierce battle. Graphics are average. Being that such a large amount is shown on the screen at one time, there's not a lot of detail given to most sprites (like the miniscule Tony). The challenge is high, since the K icon is usually hidden well, requiring lots of exploration while being fired upon. If players can get that far, the last, sixth stage is entirely different – Tony straps on a jet pack for a free-roaming shooter stage to take on the Alien Queen. There's a lot of good ideas here. However, the game could use a bit more structure and thought, since the positive attribute of leaving the Mech to explore also leads to most of the frustration, like the very underpowered Tony and giving enemies the ability to shoot and destroy your mech while you're away from it.

Reflections: Tony Martin sounds like the name of a veteran NASCAR driver. With this title and *Metal Storm*, it was the year of the mech on the NES! This game obviously draws some inspiration from *Blaster Master*, and even though it's far inferior to that semi-classic, I still enjoy it. I always liked the idea of mech games, such as Sega's *Virtual On*, which I enjoyed in the arcade, and I was *this close* to buying *MechWarrior 2* at Computer City as a teen. Instead, I ended up buying *Warcraft II* and getting destroyed online by "grunt rushes." – PC



Metal Storm

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Feb. 1991
Developer: Tamtex
Publisher: Irem
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★⯪

Pilot an M-308 Gunner mech through multiple levels of run and gun gameplay with a twist: the gravitational field can be flipped at any time for both the player and the enemies. The Gunner must navigate side-scrolling levels with precision and sometimes initiate many polarity changes in quick succession to survive obstacle courses of pits, spikes, and gun turrets. The control is tight and the mechs animate smoothly and fluidly. Levels can loop endlessly upwards and downwards by jumping through one way platforms, and the real goal of the game is not just to destroy all enemies in your path and make it to the exit at the far right, but also to do so in the fastest, most efficient way. Power-ups are available to aid players on their way and range from shielding that lets the Gunner take additional hits to enhanced wave shots that are more powerful and cover more area. The enemies, including turrets, mechs, and large bosses, look wonderfully mechanical and have an excellent late '80s anime design aesthetic. Boss fights share a lot in common with shoot 'em ups with more complex attack patterns and weak spots or cores that need to be targeted specifically in order to inflict damage. This is one excellent action game that requires some quick thinking, planning, and reflexes. A must play for action game fans and mecha enthusiasts alike.

Reflections: It may be a short loop but I get hung up on watching the M-308's walking animation whenever I play. It's so nice! There are also some faux parallax scrolling effects that look mighty fine. Irem really pushed the NES with this title and it's as nice a looker as it is a player. There's a *Nintendo Power* poster that shows a model of the Gunner. I dream of having the skills to recreate one or finding someone who can. – IF

Metroid

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: Aug. 1987
Developer: Nintendo R&D1
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★⯪

A potentially dangerous creature, the Metroid, is stored deep inside the planet Zebes, and you, space hunter Samus Aran, are sent to destroy the aliens that seek to weaponize it. You explore the various areas of Zebes by platforming and shooting down the enemies swarming its corridors (or by freezing them with the Ice Beam weapon upgrade). When destroyed, foes randomly drop health balls (and missiles, once you've acquired the capacity to carry them). When you encounter each of the bosses - Kraid, Ridley, and Mother Brain - the game stops being about adventure and becomes all about the fight. If these or other dire situations completely drain your energy in the upper left, you're given a password and sent back to the elevator of that area with only 30 health. While the difficulty of the boss battles can cloud the fun, this game's focus is mainly on exploration. There is great satisfaction in running, jumping, and rolling through every unique area. Each one not only has its own look and varied enemies, such as Zebs that spawn out of pipes in rocky Brinstar, but also features different music, creating a distinct feel. You have complete freedom of the map, although progress is sometimes blocked until you have a necessary Power Item - for example, you need the Bomb to blast weak bricks under you. There is little linearity, and backtracking to previous areas is essential! This is what creates a special experience that, despite some challenging spots, is easily one of the best on the NES.

Reflections: *Metroid*'s high status is undeniable. It's the progenitor of a platforming/adventure subgenre that emphasizes exploring and backtracking, often referred to by the name mashup formed with *Castlevania* - Metroidvania. The number of titles inspired by this game are endless, and it has had a great influence in gaming. The big "surprise" factor, hinted at in the manual, is that Samus is a woman, which you find out by beating the game within a certain time frame (or by hearing it from a friend at school). There is so much to love here, from strong graphics and moody music to tight controls and engaging exploration. You are in for a true adventure from the moment you roll down the first corridor to the confrontation with the final boss. Bikini reveal or not, this is a game you must see to the end. – KY

Michael Andretti's World GP

Genre: Racing, Simulation
Release Date: June 1990
Developer: Human Entertainment
Publisher: American Sammy
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

This Formula One racing titles features practice mode, single races against a human or computer opponent, and a Grand Prix campaign mode consisting of nine different levels and 16 authentic race tracks. The racing is definitely a simulation here: three out of four of the different race cars require manual shifting, and deteriorating tires will require a pit stop. On screen, the top half consists of the race track map (which is helpful), while the bottom is where the action takes place in third-person perspective, with the speed, gears, RPM meter, lap, and time. Being a simulation, players will have to drive more realistically than other racing games, being very mindful to break before turns, being careful of the turning speed (to not spin out or go off course), and maintaining the same speed via A + B until the turn is completed. Once on the straightaways, players can be more careful in going for top speed. There's not a huge amount of detail and the racing screen is small, but the smooth scaling and engine sounds add to the great sense of speed the game conveys, while the turn prompts are helpful in keeping on track. During the Grand Prix, racers will face off against several other racers with different personalities and racing styles, including Michael Andretti himself. There's a steep learning curve when it comes to the actual racing controls themselves, but there's enough here to keep the hardcore racing fan engaged.

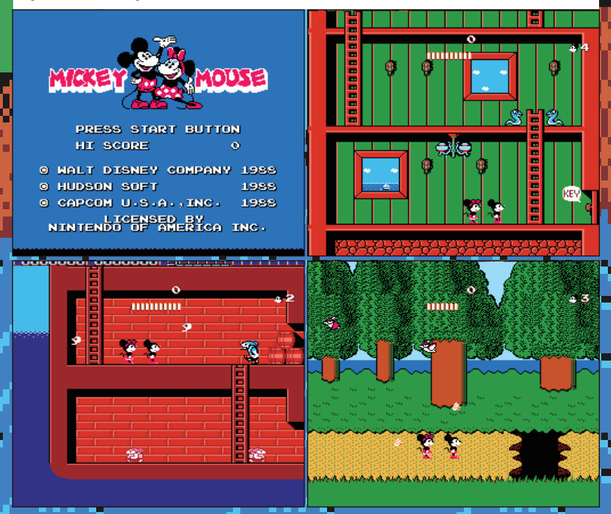
Reflections: This is a deep racing game, perhaps too deep for me, but I can recognize what Human Entertainment put together here, and Formula One fans must have had a field day with this game. I'm sure this sold well in areas of the United States where racing sports are popular, like the South and the Mid West, since the game is relatively common yet I knew absolutely no one who has ever owned it when it was released. – PC

Mickey Mousecapade

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Oct. 1988
Developer: Hudson Soft
Publisher: Capcom
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

With his sweetheart Minnie, Mickey Mouse searches for their friend through five side-scrolling levels (the Fun House, the Ocean, the Woods, the Pirate Ship, and the Castle). With the exception of the Fun House, these levels can be selected individually by using a special button combination at the title screen for the sake of practicing them. The Ocean and Pirate Ship levels are surprisingly short, but provide relatively challenging jumping sequences and enemies, respectively. The Fun House and Castle levels entail searching for keys and backtracking, and the lengthy Woods level requires trial and error to choose the four correct exits from all the false ones. Minnie follows close behind Mickey and mimics his moves, jumps, and attacks. In the first stage, the Fun House, the two of them get equipped with stars via separate treasure chests, which they shoot at a variety of enemies, including bosses/mini-bosses. While many enemies are generic, like spiders and birds, a few are recognizable Disney creations, like walking broomsticks and playing card guards. Bosses range from a nondescript wizard to Maleficent of *Sleeping Beauty* fame. Only Mickey takes damage, and he replenishes his health bar with cakes and diamonds. These are discovered by shooting windows, lamps, and hidden places, which can be recognized by a change in the star's sound effect. These places also conceal extra lives, guardian angels that grant temporary invincibility, room-clearing blue diamonds, and even secret exits in the Woods level. However, in the Fun House and Castle levels, they sometimes hold crows that kidnap Minnie. She must be found and rescued by getting a key from a hidden place, which takes Mickey to a room with four statues. Selecting the correct one releases Minnie, but a wrong choice forces Mickey to find another key and try again. Minnie also proves a problem during regular gameplay, because she often gets stuck on the wrong side of a platform, and because her falling into a pit results in a lost life for Mickey. This game is brief and rather easy, but the different levels provide enough variety to make it fun to play.

Reflections: More often than not, Minnie's just a liability to Mickey in this game. Sure, she keeps him company and boosts his firepower a bit, but she holds him back, too. She frequently needs to be rescued, and if she goes down, she takes Mickey with her. It's like a cynical take on the nature of relationships, or at least on having a girlfriend. But before you find yourself agreeing with that point of view, ask yourself: Are you a mouse, or a man? – AP



Mickey's Adventures in Numberland

Genre: Educational, Platformer
Release Date: Mar. 1994
Developer: Beam Software
Publisher: Hi Tech Expressions
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★

Evil Pete has stolen all the number molds, and it's up to the player to take control of the iconic Mickey Mouse to retrieve them in this educational title. Mickey begins on an overhead map and can walk to and play several levels in any order, including Number City, Space Center, Number Museum, and Number Factory, before getting to Pete's Hideout. Mickey, armed with bubble gum, is tasked to look for and collect a specific number (between one and 10) at multiple spots on each level by walking and jumping around. After collecting all of the specified number symbols for that stage, players must then answer a simple number puzzle to advance. There are some enemies scattered throughout the levels, but there is no real penalty for touching them nor for trying to collect incorrect numbers (except on the "super advanced" difficulty). It is extremely simple and will not be challenging nor interesting, except for very young children. It is well made though, with some nice character animation, smooth controls, and excellent voice samples of Mickey.

Reflections: I never really saw the appeal of Mickey Mouse. He always seemed a little too nice and "goody two-shoes" for my liking. Then again, I grew up watching Bugs Bunny with his twisted humor and propensity to blow up people's faces with explosives or by tying a shotgun barrel into a knot. –PC

Mickey's Safari in Letterland

Genre: Educational, Platformer
Release Date: Mar. 1993
Developer: Beam Software
Publisher: Hi Tech Expressions
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

Mickey Mouse goes on an alphabet safari in this educational title. Players begin by selecting a stage to play via a map: Yukon, Swamp, Forest, Caribbean, Pyramid, and Jungle. In the platforming stages, Mickey must seek out letters and capture them with a net, while jumping and bouncing around. Once the player retrieves three letters, it will spell a simple word that is revealed and the level will end. There are animals in the levels, but they do not damage the player in any real way. Short bonus levels can be entered, which consist of simply selecting a specified letter out of an alphabet displayed on screen. It's a very simple game that's polished with nice graphics, music, and voice samples. The different stages are nicely laid out and drawn to reflect their environment as well. It may appeal to toddlers, but players any older should not really enjoy the game nor find much educational value in it.

Reflections: For some reason, this game seems to have a nicer color palette than *Adventures in Numberland* does. As you can see, I'm struggling to come up with something worthwhile to discuss here. My parents never took me to Disney World as a child, and I still remind them of it to this day. There, that's something. – PC

Micro Machines

Genre: Racing
Release Date: 1991
Developer: Codemasters
Publisher: Camerica
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

Based upon the tiny toy line, this overhead racing title pits the player against 10 other opponents over 24 tracks. After selecting the player's character and the first three opponents (they vary in driving speed and difficulty), the racing begins. Races usually consist of three laps and take place on unique surfaces, such as a billiards table, breakfast table, and bathtub, reflecting the stature of the tiny toys. The type of vehicle varies with each race, like race cars, jeeps, tanks (which can shoot), speedboats, helicopters, and more. Each racer has its own speed and maneuverability the player must learn in order to adjust to the course. The courses themselves are challenging, with many turns, road hazards, and the ability to run off the track and be disabled for a time. The fact that there is no course map and the player's car is dead center on the screen makes turning in quick vehicles very difficult unless the player has the courses memorized. If the player comes in first or second, they will move on without sacrificing a life, and as the opponents lose and drop out, they will be replaced by others by the player. The difficulty curve here is very stark, as the combination of tough courses and tough drivers can get overwhelming very quickly. This is a shame, since on the surface, it's a fun racing game with very nice controls but succumbs to some below average design decisions. The two-player competitive mode is a swing and a miss, with both racers trying to get one screen ahead to earn colored flags to win. However, being way out in front can be a detriment, since it's then near impossible to anticipate some turns, resulting in a wipe out and the player behind flipping positions and earning a flag. It's an entertaining time, with some colorful graphics and nice sounds, but the fun is limited by some serious flaws.

Reflections: I never quite got into Micro Machines toys as a kid, even though I had (mostly) used Hot Wheels and Matchbox cars. By that time, I was a little older, so most of the toys I played with involved tough guys with deadly weapons or mutant reptiles. I was as fair as possible with this review, especially given my history of getting absolutely destroyed by my cousin regularly in two-player mode. Since he owned it, he had the courses memorized, so I didn't have a chance to even rank and usually rage-quit after 10 minutes. Still, it has that trademark bubbly Codemasters music that I love. – PC

MiG-29 Soviet Fighter

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: 1989
Developer: Codemasters
Publisher: Camerica
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

Players command a MiG-29 fighter jet to take down a terrorist organization in this shooter title. Two gaming modes are presented to the player which alternate: a third-person arcade-style mode where players fight against enemy jets and helicopters, and an overhead vertical mode where players fight off enemies in the air and on the ground. Gameplay in the third-person mode is very smooth and fast, greatly conveying a sense of speed with the 3D scaling effects. Unfortunately, this mode comes down mostly to just dodging incoming missile fire and trying to fend off those baddies firing at you. Boss battles against large planes usually end these stages, but they are mostly the same, just with more projectiles to avoid. The overhead sections are a bit better, with smooth movement and light parrying being necessary to get through the hail-fire while fighting back. This mode seems to be more balanced, since returning fire seems to accomplish a bit more in stopping the incoming onslaught. Four different firing modes with different patterns can be earned and switched between, although the third and fourth are far more powerful, leaving no reason to use the first two. Levels are broken up by refueling and landing mini-games which are slightly more than perfunctory. Options include being able to flip the controls for flying vertically, but for some strange reason that reversal carries over from the third-person levels into the overhead ones. Presentation is very sound with fine graphics and bubbly, lively music – which doesn't exactly fit the tone of the game but is well done nonetheless. While falling short on keeping some gameplay elements compelling, it's worth taking a spin in this foreign jet.

Reflections: What pinko commies designed this and thought this game was acceptable?! Why would you fight for those evil Russkies? Actually, it's fairly amusing and a nice change of pace to play a game that features a "Kremlin Role of Honour" high score list. I was expecting the game to go one step further and have you fighting against the evil United States for some fresh fun, but I guess they could only go so far with the concept before totally turning off consumers in the Western world. – PC

Might & Magic: Secret of the Inner Sanctum

Genre: RPG, Adventure
Release Date: July 1992
Developer: New World Computing
Ported by: G. Amusements
Publisher: American Sammy
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★½

The game begins in Sorpigal village with little explanation. That's no mistake: you're discovering an adventure in a high fantasy world. What is your quest? Go find one! You move in a 3D first-person perspective with the D-pad or press a button to select menu actions like USE. The screen is split: dungeon view on top and menu on the bottom. A sliding effect on backgrounds simulates your moving field of view when you turn, minimizing disorientation, and there's a map (but it won't work in darkness). Different music plays for various settings, and the graphics are pleasant but minimal. You never see your party and NPCs don't have sprites. You'll find stores for spells and equipment and when talking to people there you'll see their portraits, yet in first-person view nothing's there. If you reach a sign or stairs, the game tells you. Treasure doesn't appear after battles, but instead you must SEARCH for it. The gameplay requires your involvement and imagination, like paper RPGs. Through investigation you progress, like finding a secret door and a leprechaun who might help. Monsters attack anywhere, even when you rest. In battle the screen changes to show enemies on a black background and a menu with battle commands. The monsters are familiar yet genre-appropriate, including skeletons, goblins, slimes, and more. They're well drawn but static, with flashes and sounds denoting action, and your attacks appear as slashes over them. The title utilizes *D&D*-style information, so having the manual's spell list helps. It shows information like effects, type, and duration. For example, "CURE 1" heals 8 HP at Cleric level 1. You'll battle (and die) often since "grinding" is necessary to stay strong. Mercifully, there's an "AUTO" command to simplify matters. In this game's era, all RPGs were demanding. If that sounds great, then this title will be appealing.

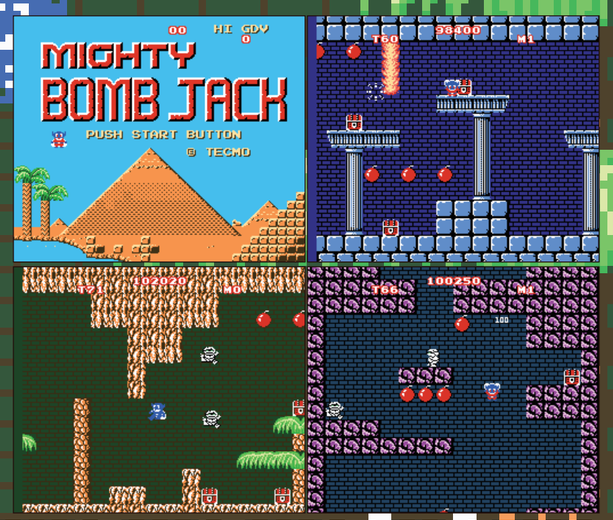
Reflections: Since the full name of the original is *Might and Magic: Book One - The Secret of the Inner Sanctum*, I'm not spoiling much to reveal that the NES ending is a cliffhanger that leads into "Book Two." That wasn't unheard of for computer games, but even today a "sequel bait" nonending is permissible grounds for controller-throwing. That sequel, *Gates to Another World*, never came to the NES, and although it was scheduled to arrive on the SNES, the U.S. version was cancelled. Still, the sequel was available on many other platforms (including Sega Genesis) so you could play it somehow, but if you're strictly a Nintendo console player, you're out of luck. – KN

Mighty Bomb Jack

Genre: Platformer
Release Date: May 1987
Developer: Tecmo
Publisher: Tecmo
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

As the hero Jack, the player must jump and work their way through 16 multi-room levels picking up bombs for points, treasure, and avoiding enemies (skulls, mummies, insects, birds, etc.) while getting to the end of the level. Jack has no means of attack, but fortunately has jumps that reach the entire height of the room, and can control and stop/redirect jumps with ease by hitting the jump button in mid-air to stop and float more slowly down. The complexity of the jumping mechanics makes the game what it is, requiring precise and very technical movement in order to zip around the rooms and avoid enemies, who often materialize close to the player. Treasure chests litter the levels and can be opened by jumping on and then off of them. They contain points, coin points, and "mighty coins," which can be cashed in with the B button for the Mighty Power power-ups. Using one coin turns Jack blue and allows players to open not just the normal treasure chests, but the orange ones. Using a second coin turns Jack orange and gives him the ability to open all treasure chests by simple touch only. A third mighty coin cash-in turns Jack green and will transform all enemies on screen into coins for a limited amount of time. Power-ups wear off after some jumping. At the end of each level, the player will end up in a treasure room with a chance for lots of bonus points, but the constrained area puts the player in greater harm's way with the enemies. Most of the time the player will have to rely on their quickness and nifty jumps to succeed, but the difficulty ramps up fairly quickly and is not for the faint of heart, even with its light, cute appearance. It's a very straightforward concept, but it's executed well and it's fun for a bit.

Reflections: It's not clear to me whether or not Jack is a superhero. I sure hope so, otherwise the mask and cape getup he has going on is just fulfilling some strange fetish. The first time I played this game, I thought I was supposed to avoid all the bombs placed in the rooms. Why would you want to collect detonating explosives? – PC

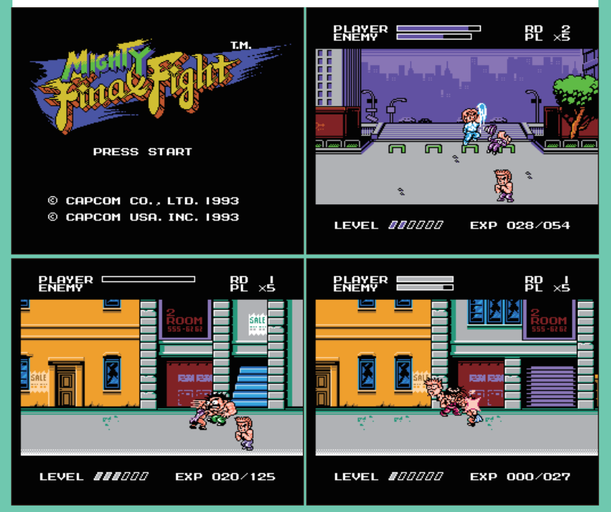


Mighty Final Fight

Genre: Beat 'em Up
Release Date: July 1993
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★★⯪

In this beat 'em up, Jessica has been kidnapped by the Mad Gear gang, and it's up to Guy, Cody, and father Haggar to brawl through five levels to rescue her. Players select one of the three fighters with different attacks/abilities. Guy is quickest with his martial arts moves, but is weakest. Haggar is strongest with his slower brawling and wrestling moves, and Cody is average in strength and speed with his street-fighting skills. Each fighter has a standard standing attack combo, at least one jumping attack, and grab attacks with either striking and/or applying a move/throw. Players will usually tackle two of several different enemy types at one time, with each enemy having their own unique attacks and patterns. Both the player and enemy thugs have their own health bar. If players feel overwhelmed, they can unleash a special attack to take out enemies on all sides via B + A, but this will take a small portion of the player's health bar away. In a few of the levels, players will be able to grab a character-specific weapon that can be wielded until the player takes damage: knife for Cody, shuriken for Guy, and a mallet for the husky Haggar. Destroying barrels will also yield food to replenish health. Defeating enemies will earn experience points, and with each level up, the health bar length increases. At level four, they will also have access to a character-specific special move by tapping forward + B. There isn't that much new to see after a while, as the same several enemies will be faced over and over again, but the nice backgrounds of each of the five stages set the scene well, and the fine controls and snappy gameplay keep things moving at a brisk pace. The stage bosses are a little challenging, but overall players shouldn't have a tough time due to the number of lives and continues available. Graphics are very nice, well-drawn cartoon sprites giving the game personality, and the little dialog between the protagonists and bosses is amusing. The lack of a two-player mode is disappointing, but this technically polished and fun beat 'em up should keep players' fingers tapping away.

Reflections: Released in the NES twilight, this title was a fine non-Mega Man sendoff to one of the strongest third-party NES publishers (who were definitely integral for the system's success). I was a huge fan of *Final Fight* in the arcade, so I was sorely disappointed that the SNES port not only lacked its great co-op mode, but also lacked my favorite character, Guy! How could I possibly purchase the game when Capcom betrayed me?! Many others must have felt similarly, since in Japan, *Final Fight Guy* was released, which swapped out Cody for Guy (it was a Blockbuster rental release in North America). The only good port of the arcade game was the Sega CD version, which not only had all three characters, but also a nice soundtrack and even added cutscenes with real audio voices! – PC



Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!!

Genre: Sports, Fighting
Release Date: Oct. 1987
Developer: Nintendo R&D3
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★★★

Little Mac takes on colorful opponents in the ring on the way to dethroning champion "Iron" Mike Tyson in this memorable boxing title. Gameplay in the ring takes place in a single spot from behind Little Mac. He is smaller than his opponents, allowing the player to see both boxers clearly. Little Mac can punch to the body with his left hand using B and right using A. Combining with UP will throw a punch to the face. Little Mac can dodge quickly left or right, as well as block or duck opponents' punches. Players can attempt to throw punches and land them whenever they want, or more effectively, can wait until opponents throw a punch. If players dodge one, opponents will usually be stunned, allowing the player to land one to several punches in a row. This creates the crux of the gameplay experience, as the game is more about learning patterns and pure reflexes versus being a boxing simulation. At certain moments, players can land a single punch when opponents flash or blink, and if punched in that instant, players will earn a star (up to three). By then pressing START, players will throw a slower but more powerful uppercut punch. If players have their punches blocked or are punched themselves, they will not only lose energy but also lose hearts. If hearts are depleted, Little Mac will grow tired (and turn pink) and will not be able to throw a punch again until dodging punches successfully. Each match is three rounds, and the match ends in one of three ways: KO (boxer cannot make the 10 count after being knocked down), TKO (boxer is knocked down three times in one round), or a decision after three rounds are complete (some opponents cannot be defeated this way). The gameplay is fast and fluid, as the boxing happens in quick spurts, with the player having to be ever alert to punch, dodge, and counter-punch to succeed. The array of interesting opponents includes ones like Don Flamenco, King Hippo, Piston Honda, Soda Popinski, and more, each with unique patterns and attacks in the ring, such as Bald Bull's devastating charge attack. If players can trudge through all challengers they will then face Mike Tyson – one of the more difficult end-game bosses in the NES library. Shining with personality and polish, the entire presentation is top-notch, with quality graphics and large sprites, nice sound effects, and quality music. This high quality gaming package should thrill gamers of all types, boxing fans or not.

Reflections: *Punch-Out!!* and *Super Punch-Out!!* were originally arcade titles that featured the player as a green-haired, wire-framed boxer that the player could see through. The NES lacked the horsepower to pull this off, so Little Mac was made smaller in order to also see the opponent. In Japan, this title was originally released for the Famicom (in a limited gold cart) featuring Super Macho Man as the final boxer. Before the NES version was released, Nintendo licensed the likeness for rising boxing phenom Mike Tyson, and the rest is history. – PC

Millipede

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Oct. 1988
Developer: Atari Games,
Ported by: HAL Laboratory
Publisher: HAL America
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

This passable NES port of Atari's sequel to Centipede has players destroy bugs as they descend through a mushroom garden on a single screen. While many critters such as fleas, snails, and spiders will attempt to kill the player, the main focus is on the segmented millipede itself, always moving back, forth and downward every time it hits a mushroom. Players must maneuver a cursor around the bottom fourth of the screen, quickly dodging spiders and other insects, while shooting at the descending millipede. Shooting the gruesome critter anywhere but its first or last segment will split the creature, making it harder to handle. Destroying all segments will start a new, faster, higher scoring millipede at the top. The sequel adds new enemies, such as inchworms that slow down other enemies when destroyed, and beetles that can really mess things up with the indestructible flowers they create. DDT bombs appear occasionally, and shooting them can take out a bunch of mushrooms or, if timed well, a good chunk of our leggy friend. While fun, this is a game that doesn't translate well from its arcade counterpart. While the original controlled with a trackball, which allowed precise movements and speed, the constant pace of moving with the NES gamepad results in cheap deaths and the inability to zip around, which is necessary for stronger play strategies.

Reflections: Cashing in on popularity with a sequel has always been around, and just like present day, a lot of arcade sequels from the 1980s feel like tired rehashes simply to make a buck. While *Centipede* is rightly regarded as a classic, it's unlikely anyone will hear much enthusiastic talk about *Millipede*. The game isn't awful, but it's just entirely unnecessary. The flow and purity of design is lost amid a host of new enemies and attempts to hit DDT canisters. I stick to the original and think many others do the same. – IF

Milon's Secret Castle

Genre: Action, Puzzle
Release Date: Sept. 1988
Developer: Hudson Soft
Publisher: Hudson Soft
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

Milon must save Princess Eliza from Evil Warlord Maharito in this notoriously difficult game. Starting outside Garland Castle with access to a few rooms, Milon will find bonus stages, as well as keys, doors and power-ups like boots, a hammer, a shrink potion, etc., to enter other areas. The rooms are maze-like with hidden pitfalls, false walls, melting floors, etc. With a mid-range bubble attack that can travel at upward or downward angles, he fights many interesting re-spawning enemies that have varied movement patterns. However, the seven crystal-yielding bosses prior to the final confrontation are disappointingly similar. Because hits don't afford temporary invincibility, a simple enemy touch can become a devastating multi-hit combo. Fortunately, by shooting blocks, enemies, and empty spaces, Milon can find keys, doors, hearts to replenish health, umbrellas for rapid-firing, honeycombs to increase his life meter, Hudson Bees for shields, money, and shops to learn hints and buy necessary gear. Unfortunately, a player would be hard pressed to find the crucial first hidden shop without outside help, and the shops' hints are at times too cryptic. Also, the lack of a password/save system can make this exploration-heavy game overly challenging. Milon does get unlimited continues after the first boss, but that hardly makes up for having to rediscover so many things upon each play-through. While cute and engaging, this game may suit only the most patient player.

Reflections: Before playing this game, I played another Hudson title, the excellent *Princess Tomato in the Salad Kingdom*. In it, the personified persimmon Percy boasts, "Boss, I finished *Milon's Secret Castle* in two days!" He quickly retracts his statement with a "Just kidding!" which goes to show you that even other Hudson characters find this game to be tough. Well, I, unlike some (sort of) people, did complete this game in just two days... with the help of a walkthrough... and several play-through videos... and by leaving my console on overnight so I wouldn't have to start over. Still, it means I'm at least a better player than a fictional persim-man from 25 years ago... right? – AP

Mission Cobra

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: 1990
Developer: Sachen
Publisher: Bunch Games
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★

As the pilot of the Cobra, a fast and powerful helicopter, you must infiltrate the enemy's defenses and take down every last mothership for total victory! In this top-down vertical shooter, it's you (and a friend, if going the two-player route) against a whole legion of bad guys. You begin with a "single firing" gun, but as you destroy enemies, they drop items such shields and energy refills along with a variety of weapon upgrades, including "triple angled firing" or "four-way firing." Your energy is tracked at the bottom of the screen, and it drains slowly over time as well as when you're damaged by another ship, so it's important to get any energy pickups that enemies drop. If your energy reaches zero, then the next hit you take blows up your chopper. There are no extra lives or continues; it's simply game over. While this may seem harsh, the game is comprised of three unique stages that repeat upon completion. Each stage follows the same pattern: a section of enemy jets, a pair of helicopters similar to yours, a sped-up set of enemies, and a powerful mothership. There is very little AI in this game, so much of doing well involves learning to dodge and fire around the patterns. The graphics are plain, with almost no attention paid to the backgrounds. Similarly, there is absolutely no music, not even on the title screen. The only sounds you hear are the firing of shots and the constant whirring of your rotor. This unlicensed game plays well for what's there, but sadly, it's just not enough to make it fun.

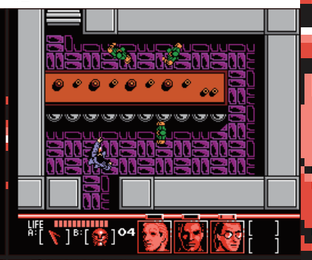
Reflections: Ah yes, 1990. The year of such greats as *Super Mario Bros. 3*, *Final Fantasy*, and *Ninja Gaiden II*. This game lands on the other end of the spectrum, but such is the life of many unlicensed titles. With its poor graphics and short length, it feels more like a game in development rather than a complete experience. There was certainly potential for it to be decent; for example, I like the way energy is handled, forcing you to find a balance between hanging back and passively draining your meter versus being in the thick of the action, hoping for energy refills. Unfortunately, that's not enough to carry the rest of it, and nobody's getting "fun meter" pickups in this game. – KY

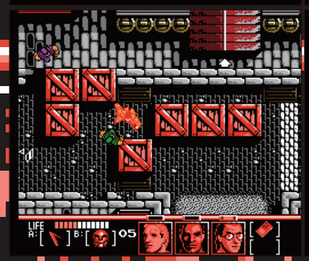
Mission: Impossible

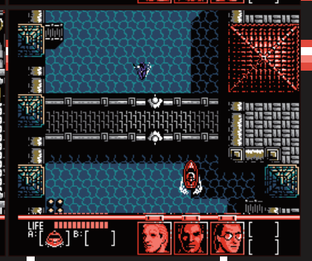
Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: Sept. 1990
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Ultra Games
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★

Join up with the covert ops unit from the '80s TV show in their quest to save Dr. O from the clutches of Sinister 7 and prevent World War III in this top-down action adventure. The three main agents with unique abilities can be switched out on the fly with a quick tap of the Start button. Max employs long range attacks with guns, Grant is much faster and more powerful in close quarters, and Nicholas flings a boomerang and can also employ disguises to sneak past evildoers. Each has their own life bar, so switching out is key as the difficulty is brutal. Lose an agent and the player is returned to the previous section entered, but losing all three restarts the stage. The game has an open feel where the player can interact with various NPCs who give out tidbits of intel to aid in completing the stage along. Puzzle-solving elements are invoved, such as hitting switches and obtaining passkeys to progress and to circumvent traps and dead ends. Instant-death scenarios must be avoided, for example on stage one when going into the sewers: if a certain lever hasn't been pulled, then a wall pushes the operative straight into the water. It is cheap deaths like this that make the game feel harsh. Poor AI also hinders the fun somewhat, as enemies will often exhibit poor behavior such as shooting at one spot, but then will suddenly become super lethal. Even the boss fights are extreme, as stage three sees the team fighting a guy who can multiply amidst throwing shurikens while at the same time the floor slowly collapses away. Luckily the game changes pace by providing variety. Stage two sees the player zipping through the Venetian canals at high speed via boat dodging enemy agents and hostile fire in a vertical shooter section, and stage five has our plucky agents slaloming down the Swiss Alps avoiding helicopters and cracks in the ground. Slick presentation and well-composed music add to the whole aesthetic, as it has the official opening theme (complete with lit match intro), but it can't mask the lack of a difficulty curve in a game that otherwise could have been excellent.

Reflections: This title has the same color palette and similar control mechanics as *Snake's Revenge*. There is also a faint nod to *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, with the selecting of different characters for different tasks. The only problem is that *MI* isn't as playable as either, as the difficulty makes having fun supremely inaccessible. It is a shame too, as it has the feel of something potentially special but becomes frustrating the second you enter the sewers in stage one. I love the notion of switching between the agents depending on the situation, but even this falls flat if one dies – it makes the game much harder the second and third time around, as if the game is punishing you for not beating the stage on the first try, which in itself is ironically Mission: Impossible. – JE





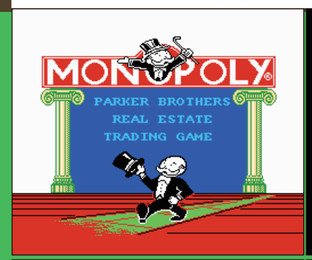


Monopoly

Genre: Board Game, Strategy
Release Date: May 1991
Developer: Sculptured Software
Publisher: Parker Brothers
Players: 1-8
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

Faithfully translating the board game, the object is to acquire the most property and wealth. You roll dice, move around the board, and when you land on unowned properties you can buy them. Players landing there subsequently owe you rent, and monopolizing property colors authorizes you to build houses/hotels, increasing the rent to devastating sums. Bankruptcy means you lose, while the last player standing wins. The original's more tedious actions are automated, like figuring rent, mortgages, etc. The interface allows complex trades involving cash and multiple properties. Pressing SELECT opens a menu for tasks like options, building, trading, and viewing players' portfolios. Property card hands aren't private and watching opponents' assets is key. Suppose Ollie has Boardwalk, and you need it to complete your blue set. You know he needs Marvin Gardens for a yellow monopoly, but if you can trade it he'll want more in addition since the blues are more valuable. You can pose a deal from the menu, selecting the properties/cash you want and what you'll offer (expect a counter-offer). The look and feel is pleasant, with Ragtime-like music, nicely animated Community Chest and Chance cards designed like the print ones, and (brief, skippable) animations for moving board pieces and events. These don't hamper gameplay and you can set the computer to "hurry" like a human can. Up to eight people can play, and if someone quits you can switch that player to computer control. Alleviating flaws of its cardboard counterpart, it's recommended to both board game and NES players.

Reflections: *Monopoly* isn't the best game to play with friends and family for fun. It's about destroying everyone else, so the people who actually understand the game soon bankrupt the amateurs. There may be crying, yelling, and mild violence. Once you learn the rules, the choices you get to make become increasingly narrow. All of the computer players are competent and don't behave any differently from each other. Is that because they were poorly programmed? No. It's because *Monopoly* is a poorly designed game. You always buy property unless you lack the funds to do so. You never let your opponent get a monopoly in a trade unless you're getting one too. *Monopoly* tournament videos (yes, they exist) show pros playing in very much the same way. There are some risky decisions that make a difference, but the literal roll of the dice can ruin your plans at any time. On the NES, if all the humans in play go bankrupt and the computer players remain, the game doesn't end; the computer continues playing. It's odd to see a video game playing itself, as this might seem to defeat its own purpose, but for *Monopoly* it's appropriate. It captures the real-life experience of the game, where if you lose you just sit with nothing to do but watch the other players carry on without you. Because you are a loser. That's *Monopoly*! – KN



Monster in My Pocket

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Jan. 1992
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Konami
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★½

Konami brings the popular '90s toys to life in an enjoyable but standard side-scrolling action game. Players guide either a shrunken Vampire or (Frankenstein's) Monster through different household environments fighting other monsters being controlled by the evil Warlock. There are no differences beyond cosmetics between the two playable characters, and each is equipped with a standard punch, a double jump, and the ability to throw certain objects. Environments are playful with large coffee mugs, books, and other oversized household objects. Some of these large objects, such as eggs and golf balls, are hazards that must be avoided as they roll towards the player like a boulder. The graphics really nail the toy line perfectly. Anyone familiar with the actual rubber casts will be happy to see them recreated with care, and many of the most popular monsters such as Spring Heeled Jack and Ghost pop up everywhere. The music is equally well-crafted, creating a great audio and visual package. However, the game suffers from a lack of variety, and the basic moveset and lack of upgrades can diminish the play value over time. The difficulty is rather high but not entirely unfair, and requires more pattern watching than it does memorization to succeed. Despite the average gameplay, the presentation really makes this a great game for fans of the toy line.

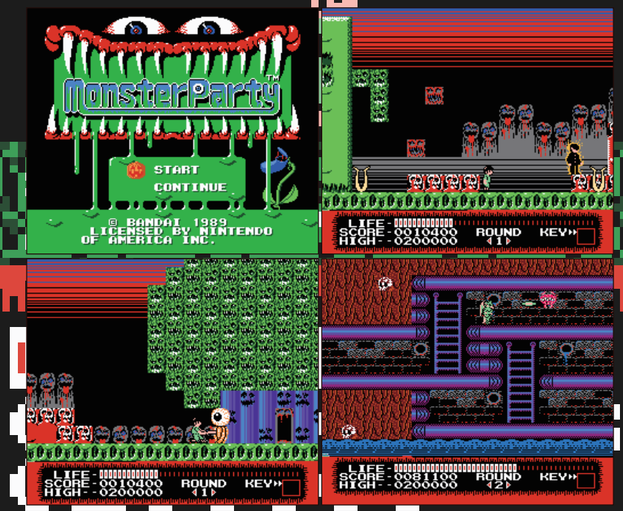
Reflections: My younger brother was obsessed with these things and I always thought they were freakin' rad. I was "too cool" to really get into them myself at the time. I actually had not played this game until recently and was overjoyed when my favorite, the simple Ghost, floated through and looked just how I remembered. – IF

Monster Party

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: June 1989
Developer: Human Entertainment
Publisher: Bandai
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★

Travel through the Dark World as Mark and help the gargoyle Bert defeat the evil monsters in this visually creative and fun side-scrolling action game. Mark has a weak attack with a baseball bat at short range, but can use the bat to smack enemy projectiles back at the monsters for both increased range and damage. In addition to this, Mark can find pills that allow him to temporarily turn into Bert (they joined bodies upon entering the Dark World, you see) which grants him flight and beam breath. The goal in each stage is to enter various rooms and fight the bosses inside, eventually being granted a key to the next level. There's tons of charm to these mid-bosses, like a singing eggplant (reminiscent of a certain popular movie character) to pumpkin ghosts. Even entering a wrong room is made amusing by the presence of flies hovering over a pile that says "I'm dead." Loud colors contrast and clash everywhere and the use of bright, blood red in large amounts helps the visual look of the game stand out from the standard fare. This is even more true when, in certain scenarios, the scenery transforms into something even weirder and more gruesome: trees with twisted faces and absolutely disturbing human/dog hybrids appearing or replacing certain enemies. None of this creativity would matter if the package didn't come together, but the music is catchy and the controls are good enough that jumping around and battling with little mummies, vampires, and even disembodied legs can be done with relative ease. While attack range could be a little bit longer, the nice use of the bat to knock back projectiles is a neat trade-off. The title is challenging, fun, and both goofy and gory in a way that isn't really seen anywhere else on the NES. From the strange outdoor worlds, to sewers and towers, this is a game worth playing through to see all of the little surprises and clever bits. There's nothing else like it on the system.

Reflections: A prototype of this game was found that shows the original game was not only further splattered in blood, but also made use of copyrighted characters. Some enemies that were left in, such as the talking eggplant in level one, are very obvious cover-ups to much more deliberate homages. – IF



Monster Truck Rally

Genre: Racing
Release Date: Sept. 1991
Developer: Realtime Associates
Publisher: INTV
Players: 1-4 (simultaneous)
Special Features: NES Four Score / Satellite compatible
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★

This monster truck game features several different race types/challenges and a bevy of options. Players may compete in a single competition type, choose all at once, change the number of laps, number of computer and human players (up to four), difficulty, and also the color of the trucks. There's even an option to race on a random track and a track editor mode. Once you get around to actually racing, you'll find a mixed bag. Play takes place in an overhead isometric perspective, with only a limited view of the current track. The races are average and a little plodding, with various turns, hills, and some jumps involved. Controls are fine with the off-road slipping and sliding you'd expect, but acceleration is based upon an awkward manual shifting method, requiring releasing and pressing the acceleration button twice to shift to second and third gears. Since the trucks downshift automatically when losing speed, keeping track of and constantly upshifting is more a nuisance than an added strategic racing element. The limited track space versus the truck size will also result in more crashes/spinouts than might be necessary for racing excitement. There are a few different races, with some filled with ramps, more hills, and crushing cars, but they are mostly variations on the same theme, with the laps lasting far too long. The nontraditional competitions are a big swing and a miss: the sled race, donut race, and tug of war – the worst offender with little rhyme or reason to its operation. There's a lot to admire here, especially the variety of racing modes and options available, but it's a shame that the actual gameplay mechanics don't live up to the rest of the package.

Reflections: The trucks don't appear exactly monstrous here, do they? I used to see the infamous "Sunday, Sunday!" monster truck event commercials as a kid, but even during the Bigfoot era of the late '80s, I had little interest in seeing oversized trucks crush car shells, nor in seeing (the much cooler) Robosaurus.

You don't know video game boredom until you watch two computer opponents engage in a tug of war for what seems like ages before the rope between the two trucks mercifully snaps, ending the melodrama. It's the equivalent of watching a long, drawn-out professional arm wrestling match, only with a lot less excitement and Sylvester Stallone NOT turning his trucker cap backwards. – PC

Moon Ranger

Genre: Action-Platformer, Shooter
Release Date: 1990
Developer: Odyssey Software
Publisher: Bunch Games
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Rare
★

As a space ranger, the player will alternate between horizontal space shooter stages and action-platformer ones, as they attempt to recover pieces of a gamma bomb to defeat the aliens. The shooter stages are subpar, with shaky graphics and simple enemies that look like they were drawn by small children – the floating pork chops (or are they asteroids?) are particularly memorable. Besides the ability to speed boost with B and pick up power-ups (for the underpowered ship), there's also the strange design element of the ship getting stuck due to hitting space rocks, making the movement on the screen limited. After flying to them, the platforming moon base stages that follow are even worse, with poor/floaty controls, enemies with no real patterns of attack, and underpowered, insufficient projectile weapons. Enemies also can stick themselves to players, quickly draining their health bar. Players here must navigate multiple screens connected by doors to find weapon power-ups and a piece of the gamma bomb to escape to the next cycle. Poor sound effects permeate both gameplay modes. While it is nice to see a game with two very different types of play, it would be even nicer if they were produced adequately for gaming.

Reflections: I like what you went for here, developers. From the title screen and funny-looking image of the Moon Ranger himself, it seems like the desired tone of the game was quirky enough, but no other piece of the game puzzle ever came together. I'm guessing it's more difficult than it looks to properly program smooth movement or jumps. Oh, and you spelled "intelligence" wrong on the story screen, Odyssey Software. – PC

Motor City Patrol

Genre: Action, Racing
Release Date: Jan. 1992
Developer: Source Research & Development
Publisher: Matchbox
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★

In this overhead driving game, players are tasked to patrol the streets in a squad car for a timed amount each day, over seven days in each of five different areas. Each day, players drive around a city section which has barriers top/bottom, but which wraps around left/right. Players can check their location as well as which buildings they are supposed to drive near (patrol) by using the Select button to bring up a map. Doing so can prevent robbers from driving in the city (red vans). If they show up on the map, players can stop them by turning on the siren (UP) and then either blocking their path with the car or shooting them. Every once in a while, public enemies will be shown to the player on a "wanted" poster (with a digitized real face photo). Players can stop these blue cars in the same way. Along the way, speeders will randomly show up and they can be stopped by trailing them for several seconds with the siren on. If the player stops these criminals, they will be awarded merit amounts based on importance (public enemy, robber, speeder). However, if they are allowed to escape, players risk getting a warning, and five warnings will end the game. Shooting two innocent drivers also ends the game, or if you total your car from too much damage. At the end of the timed days, players can cash in earned merits to repair damage, upgrade the car, or replenish spent bullets. The gameplay itself is fine for the most part, but the experience is very repetitive, and the fact that the map has to be switched to and checked so often in order to see if/where the criminals are makes it an absolute chore to play. The lack of arrows to help guide the player is a cardinal sin for a game like this, and having no option to save or continue in any way will prevent most gamers from wanting to curtail crime.

Reflections: For having such a large police force (and parked cars), I have to wonder why only one patrol car is sent out at a time... city budget issues? This game somewhat resembles the first two *Grand Theft Auto* games in having an overhead perspective while driving around a city, except that this game isn't really fun in any way. Whenever I play this game, roughly once a year, I remind myself at just how great the concept is before it's realized how short the execution falls. – PC

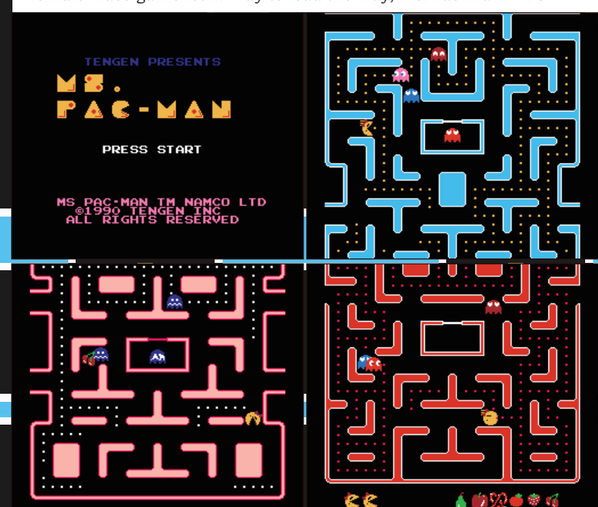
Ms. Pac-Man

Genre: Maze
Release Date: 1990
Developer: General Computer Corporation, Bally Midway
Ported by: Tengen
Publisher: Tengen
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Common
★★★★★

You are Ms. Pac-Man, the red-lipped and bow-decked female counterpart to the original voracious yellow circle. In each level, you travel in an overhead maze, consuming the small pellets that line the corridors until none are left. Periodically, cherries, a strawberry, or some other comestible will tramp through the maze, and each tastes like bonus points. Impeding your eating is a quartet of colorful ghosts: Blinky (red), Inky (blue), Pinky (pink), and Sue (orange) that constantly give chase – each with their own limited AI. A touch from any of them costs a life and returns you to the level's starting position; thankfully, previously eaten pellets remain gone. Grabbing one of a level's large power pellets temporarily turns the ghosts blue, grim-faced, and edible, and touching ghosts in this state awards points and consumes all but the ghost's eyes, which race back to the center to respawn. You can also avoid/surprise the ghosts by using the tunnels on each side of the maze; these instantly take you to the opposite side. As you advance in levels, the ghosts get quicker and the duration of the power pellet decreases. This game's simple, addictive premise of racking up points while eating, chasing or being chased is made very customizable by the impressive list of play options at your disposal. A second person can join the fun, either by taking turns or by playing simultaneously as Pac-Man himself, acting either as an adversary or as a teammate. The Pac Booster option provides a burst of speed, and you can choose whether it's off, always on, or tethered to a button. The difficulty option alters Ms. Pac-Man's and the ghosts' rates of motion. The maze selection determines your environment: Arcade levels come from the original game, Mini levels make it possible to see the whole maze at once, Big levels take longer to complete, and Strange levels offer up unusual layouts and odd bonus items. The straightforward but challenging play, combined with a cornucopia of options, ensure that this classic remains deliciously fresh.

Reflections: The Strange levels live up to their name. For example, after clearing levels with the usual strawberry and banana bonus items, you start getting glass slippers and ruby rings to devour (I guess Ms. Pac-Man has expensive taste). Then, there are the bizarre level layouts. One has pellets floating in space with few walls to guide you, another has no inner walls at all (but a grid of confounding circle barriers), and one tells you to play *Klax* and *Toobin'*. And then there's a level that goes beyond mere strangeness, that toys with the fabric of reality and tampers with that which we hold dear: a level where the power pellets don't work. It's wrong. And it's devastating. – AP

Arguably the most popular arcade game ever, *Ms. Pac-Man* is a fantastic sequel and is also notable for introducing the first iconic female video game icon. Way to lead the way, Ms. Pac-Man! – PC



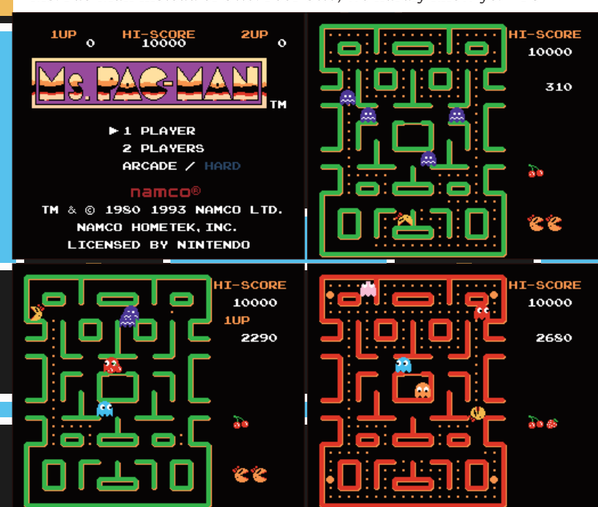
Ms. Pac-Man

Genre: Maze
Release Date: Nov. 1993
Developer: General Computer Corporation, Bally Midway
Ported by: Now Production
Publisher: Namco
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★

In this port of the arcade game, you guide the titular yellow sphere through a single-screen overhead maze, eating the extended ellipses of pellets that dot its corridors. Twice per level, an orange, a pretzel, or some other tasty treat will traipse through the maze; devouring it adds extra points to your score, displayed at the right. Meanwhile, a gaggle of googly-eyed ghosts give chase and constantly try to corner you; a touch from any of the four of them consumes a life (noted at the right), and restarts the level (minus any eaten pellets). You can attempt to evade the colorful quartet by using the maze's tunnels to reach the other side instantly, but the ghosts can also try this trick. To fight against the frisky phantoms, you can grab one of a maze's several large power pellets, making the ghosts grimace, turn blue, and flee from you for a short amount of time. In this state, you are invincible and can eat all but the ghosts' eyes, which head back to the middle to regenerate. Eating more than one ghost before they flash and return to normal doubles the points awarded by the previous ghost, i.e., the first ghost is 200 points, the second is 400, the third is 800, and the fourth is 1600 points. Collecting points is key, not only to achieving a brag-worthy high score, but also to obtaining extra lives, the first of which is gained at 10,000 points. If you survive and eat all the pellets in the maze, you move to the next level, where the ghosts are faster, the power pellets' effect is shorter, and the maze is likely the same, as this game only has a few configurations that get palette swapped. Should you wish to test your Pac-prowess, you can switch the difficulty from Arcade to Hard, or you can take turns with a second person, who plays as Pac-Man himself. In between certain levels, you are treated to short but cute vignettes of the Pacs' relationship, including the birth of Pac-Man Jr. (by stork, naturally). This game is very simple and has few frills, but still provides an addictive gameplay experience, as expected.

Reflections: I like the few little scenes of Ms. Pac-Man and Pac-Man's life, but I feel like we aren't getting the whole story. What about their wedding, with a three-tiered cake worth at least 20,000 points, or their tropical honeymoon, where they each get a Pac-tan? Heck, I want to see their first date, where they sup on power pellets with a ghost chaser. Then, they discuss their shared passions for the Muppet Fozzie Bear and for Japanese poetry, because *waka waka waka*. – AP

Ms. Pac-Man began as a hack/arcade enhancement kit for *Pac-Man* from General Computer Corp. called *Crazy Otto* (picture this game but with a Pac-Man character with legs and feet). GCC ended up showing the kit to Midway (the U.S. distribution arm of Namco), and they decided to purchase the rights and convert it to an all new game with Ms. Pac-Man instead of Otto. Poor Otto, we hardly knew ye. – PC



Muppet Adventure: Chaos at the Carnival

Genre: Action
Release Date: Nov. 1990
Developer: Mind's Eye Technology
Publisher: Hi Tech Expressions
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★⋆

The sinister Dr. Grump has kidnapped Miss Piggy and is holding her captive at the carnival. Chaos is sure to ensue as Kermit and his comrades rally to the rescue! The green-hued hero is joined by Gonzo, Fozzie Bear, and Animal, who must each battle through a selectable carnival ride to obtain a special key. Once all four keys are won, the gang can unlock the final level. In his ride, Kermit paddles his tube down a perilous river, avoiding rocks, floating logs, and miniature maelstroms. Animal hops in his bumper car and puts the pedal to the metal along an apparently endless racetrack, steering clear of obstacles such as bombs and gigantic rubber bands. Gonzo soars through space in his purple starfighter while blasting asteroids and Space Dogs until he reaches the enemy space station. And Fozzie bravely navigates a dangerous Fun House maze while throwing hearts and banana peels at pursuing Carnival Barkers. Each of the valiant rescuers can collect specific items, such as buoys, flags, fuel canisters, and bow ties, that award points, Power (health) replenishments, and/or Rides (lives). Once these four stages are conquered, the final "Dr. Grump" level is unlocked. The game suddenly becomes a side-scrolling platformer where Kermit must navigate through swarms of attacking pests such as bats and bugs. Armed only with a solitary blue feather, does the dauntless hero have what it takes to face the fearsome Grumpasaurus and his wily master, Dr. Grump? Unfortunately, this title feels like it was created back in *The Muppet Show* era of the late 1970s and early 1980s due to its overly basic gameplay, graphics, and music. Unlike the famous TV show that it's modeled after, this game fails to capture that special Jim Henson whimsy and fun.

Reflections: Remember those two old man muppets, Statler and Waldorf, sitting up in the balcony on *The Muppet Show*? They would have had a blast lampooning this game! The irascible duo could've made fun of the rudimentary graphics, heckled the primitive sound effects, and roasted the insanity-inducing music! Perhaps the cantankerous pair would have pointed out that carnival Fun Houses aren't usually constructed out of milkshakes or that even the most irresponsible of amusement parks probably wouldn't allow actual bombs on their bumper car courses. "I saw better video games than THIS back in the days before electricity!" – DM

The Mutant Virus: Crisis in a Computer World

Genre: Action, Strategy
Release Date: Apr. 1992
Developer: Rocket Science Productions
Publisher: American Softworks
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★⋆

As a miniature man in a spacesuit, the player is tasked with controlling and destroying spreading green viruses on an overhead grid in single screen rooms. The player moves and can shoot an anti-virus gun at the grids to turn the purple viruses a light blue color to indicate they are cured. Changing the spreading dot-shaped viruses into active antibodies will help the player tremendously as they will fight to turn the bad purple viruses to blue as well. After all the viruses are conquered, the player can then move onto the next stage. There doesn't seem to be much rhyme or reason to how/why viruses get conquered sometimes or sometimes they do not, as there seems to be a momentum-based algorithm based upon how viruses feed and spread, which the player has little control over. There is some strategy that can be employed, but it seems up to chance at times whether or not you can succeed based upon it. After some simple levels, the difficulty quickly gets ramped up to the point where you'll struggle to make any headway at converting the viruses to antibodies unless you happen to have studied how they grow and thrive in a college class. The "realistic" momentum of the jet-pack style controls does not help either, especially when most of the level is covered in the virus and you need precise movements in order to not lose all your energy by hitting them. A few different weapon types may be selected for short range or long range bursts, but the uneven controls and strange action leaves something to be desired.

Reflections: Germaphobes need not apply. I know it's some sort of computer virus story, but all the moving virus blobbies give me the willies. This game is incredibly frustrating. I'll give it points for originality, but it's not fun at all to battle viruses for 15 minutes and think you have them finally under control only to have them break through and start reversing all the time/effort you just put in. I also don't want to need to have a degree in microbiology in order to successfully play an NES game. – PC

Mystery Quest

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Apr. 1989
Developer: Carry Lab
Publisher: Taxan
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⯪

This odd little action-platformer's goal is for the player to retrieve treasures from four different castles. The overworld segments play like most standard platformers while castle segments are more exploratory and filled with hidden secrets. The player has a standard projectile shot and a vitality bar as opposed to a number of lives. Rapidly pressing the fire button while moving will cause Hao, the player's character, to pick up an impressive amount of speed for clearing larger jumps. The game has a simple but not unpleasant look, reminiscent of many other third-party titles of the era. Overworld portions have Hao traveling through forests, villages, and Persian castle exteriors. Enemies are fairly mundane but extremely aggressive. Scorpions jump unpredictably, bats scream in from all angles, and bees are unrelentingly on Hao's tail. Players can find hidden power-ups like boats that will let Hao cross water, usually to find an extra life or better bonus items. Stars, which restore small amounts of vitality, are hidden unless one jumps in exactly the right place to expose the bonus. These sections are generally quite fun but the castle portions fare significantly worse. The idea of exploring the mysterious castles and exposing the hidden secrets with Hao's shots sounds like fun, and occasionally is, but the amount of water and other traps, coupled with Hao's instant death upon touching them, leads to rapid frustration and anger. The game has some weird design quirks, for example tiles that denote different functions for different spaces, like a springboard-like surface as opposed to an actual physical springboard. Tricks like these were likely used to keep the programming simple. The game is fun and the idea is sound, but the execution falls short of anything truly entertaining and is often simply aggravating.

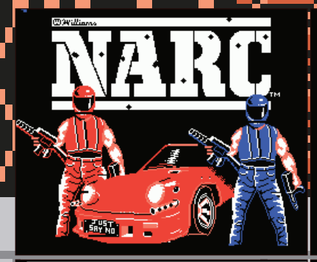
Reflections: A friend who lived outside my neighborhood once rented this for a day we had arranged to get together and play games. The game frustrated us then as it still frustrates me now. The problem I have is that it isn't inherently bad or awful, just very average. It feels like it could have been much more enjoyable but I can't begin to suggest all the things that could use slight tweaking. It isn't a case of major faults but a sum of little ones that make this hard to really recommend. – IF

NARC

Genre: Run and Gun Shooter
Release Date: Aug. 1990
Developer: Williams
Ported by: Rare
Publisher: Acclaim Entertainment
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⯪

Just "Say No" to drugs by gunning down drug dealers in this port of the action arcade game. You play as an "undercover" narcotics officer in this side-scrolling run and gun shooter encountering junkies, drug dealers, and the like. You may arrest some of the enemies by hovering on them for a few seconds and having them float away, but the real draw of this game is to use your machine gun to mow them down or the rocket launcher, which actually dismembers your enemies. Controls are stunted since the arcade version used four buttons, which translated poorly to the two button NES controller. Holding A fires the machine gun while tapping it fires the rocket launcher, while tapping B jumps and holding it kneels. This control scheme works but is awkward, sometimes resulting in the wrong function when you don't mean to. The repetitive levels often task the player with traversing left-to-right and picking up key cards to enter doors to end the stage. Killed enemies will drop money or drugs for points, but more importantly sometimes additional ammo. Hilarious villains such as Sgt. Sky High (a militant cannabis grower) and Kinky Pinky (a perverted killer clown) are examples of the not-so-subtle tone you'll see here, as well as dogs that when shot, shrink and run away. There's also the section where you can drive a Porsche 911 to run over powerful drug addicts. It's fun for a small time but isn't anything truly engaging, and is most notable as a game whose ultra-violence somehow made it past the NES censors.

Reflections: The arcade game was actually advanced for its digitized graphics, but it's a shame that the gameplay was so simplistic. *NARC* was released during the big "Just Say No" anti-drug movement of the late '80s/early '90s. That was the cover story used for its release (they used the non-trademarked "Say No!" slogan), which is really just a mindless, trigger-happy game. "Hey kids, crack cocaine is terrible, but using a rocket launcher to separate drug dealers' heads and limbs from their bodies is A-OK!" – PC



NES Open Tournament Golf

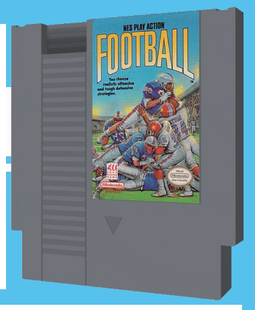
Genre: Sports
Release Date: Sept. 1991
Developer: Nintendo R&D2, HAL Laboratory
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-2
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★⯪

This full-featured golf game stars Mario, Luigi, and other Nintendo faces. There are Stroke, Match, and Tournament modes across three different courses, which provides a great amount of variety for an 8-bit sports title. Each course is represented by a country: United States, Japan, and United Kingdom, with each offering differing levels of difficulty and variety and occurrence of obstacles. On the course, players select their club, direction, select where on the ball to hit (for backspin, etc.), and can control the strength and slice/hook of the swing via a power meter. Stroke play is a versus mode in which players compete for the lowest score. Match play has players competing for a point per hole, determined by whoever sinks the ball in the least strokes. In addition to attempting to beat the computer or a friend at 18 holes, there is a larger goal of collecting one million dollars in prize money to truly "beat" the game. This is accomplished through tournament play, which tracks your score against 37 CPU players, and one's placement determines the amount of prize money. This is a great way to keep players coming back. Winning multiple rounds of stroke play will increase Mario's rank, which in turn increases the amount of prize money won in tournaments. An interesting betting mode is optional in match play tournaments that is pleasantly tense and rewards the risky. While the graphics are bright and colorful and everything has a cutesy vibe, the game is technically deep and even lets players customize their club bag loadout. This definitely set a high standard for golf games to follow.

Reflections: I really hate the real-life sport, but I find very few video games more relaxing and enjoyable than a good golf title. The thing is, I don't want nor need real golfers and courses but I absolutely want the physics and difficulty a golf game provides. *NES Open* is a good blend of the fantasy and reality, and is definitely the template used for modern Mario golf titles as well as some of my other favorite cutesy golf games, like *Hot Shots* and *Pangya*. – IF

NES Play Action Football

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Sept. 1990
Developer: TOSE
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-4 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save, NES Four Score / Satellite compatibile
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★



In this gridiron game, players choose either a single game or playoff mode to start. Eight teams are selectable, consisting of teams of real NFL players along with individual skill attributes. Game modes consist of single-player action against the computer or another player, two players teaming to take on the computer, or two players battling against another team of two. There's also a single-player mode to defeat all other seven teams to become Power Bowl champion. On the field, players can choose from one of eight different plays to run on both offense and defense. Gameplay takes place from an overhead, diagonal perspective, which takes getting used to since the directions the players move correspond to different ones on the control pad. The graphics and presentation on field are impressive, but the actual football action is subpar. While it is functional overall, players move at a very slow pace, transforming a quick sport into a plodding experience. When passing, the view switches from the closer view to a higher one, which then reverts back when the pass gets close to the receiver, which is a little jarring and hard to follow. The clunky gameplay mechanics continue with inconsistent tackling, a lack of speed balance amongst players, and having to manually hand off the football during running plays instead of doing it automatically. What looks like a promising sports title at the start, with some good graphics and nice presentation, eventually looks more like a beta version sorely in need of a round of revisions.

Reflections: This would be Nintendo's last hurrah to push a major sports title they were also publishing. They even featured this game in the *Nintendo Power* "4-Player Extra" issue solely to push the NES Satellite and Four Score multitap adapters. Unfortunately, it fell way short of expectations, and to this day I am unaware of any stories of epic four player *NES Play Action Football* action taking place. It's not a good sign when I'd gladly rather play *10-Yard Fight*. At least in that game I can play defense effectively. – PC

NFL Football

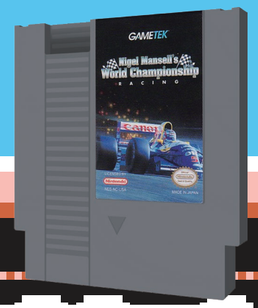
Genre: Sports
Release Date: Sept. 1989
Developer: Atlus
Publisher: LJN
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★

This football simulation consists of single games and features real NFL teams through a license (although not real players). On offense and defense, players select from more than a dozen plays and then the action begins on the horizontal field. Selecting these plays does not occur graphically on screen, but requires a complicated button procedure associated with a playbook poster included with the game. Without this, knowing how to select a specific play is impossible. Gameplay on the field is unfortunately slow and underwhelming. In particular, passing is an arduous process. When selecting a receiver, the game slows to a crawl until the pass is thrown. When that occurs, the field of play zooms into the receiver and surrounding defender(s) until the pass is received, which will then zoom the gameplay out to continue. While technically impressive, the result turns what should be a smooth sports experience into a clunky, antifun one. Even though there's some decent ideas at work, the game never seems to recover from its bevy of shortcomings and looks better on paper than in practice.

Reflections: Boy, did Atlus/LJN lay an egg with this one. This was the first licensed NFL home video game to be released in about 10 years, and it was horrendous. While *Tecmo Bowl* (with its NFL player's license) was taking over the sports console world, the unfortunate kids who were stuck with *NFL Football* could only pretend this was even close to its excellent rival at the time. Even though there were a lot of copies of this game sold, you'd be hard-pressed back then to find someone who was actually playing it, let alone admit to owning it. – PC

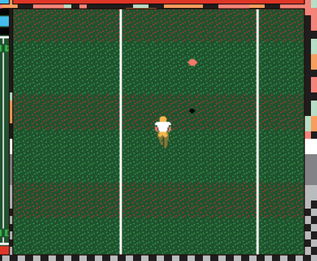
Nigel Mansell's World Championship Racing

Genre: Racing
Release Date: Oct. 1993
Developer: Gremlin Graphics
Publisher: GameTek
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★★



Take control of the titular moustachioed driving legend in this point of view Formula One arcade racing sim. Single race, full season and even the chance to practice with the man himself are all on offer from the go. Jumping straight into a long-winded campaign will result in defeat so a few practice laps are recommended to shave off vital seconds. There are 16 varied tracks to choose from as the player battles for pole position against real pro racers, each offering a change of pace and difficulty. The actual racing looks quite attractive, though the color palette (mainly green) is a little drab. The sense of speed, however, is excellent and the scaling effect for the other racers looks fantastic. The controls really complement the speed, but the on-screen map can hinder the gameplay at times as it is too small and squashed, forcing the player to make an error occasionally. Also, the music (all two tracks) quickly becomes frustrating, constantly looping during menus and game play. Making strategic pit stops throughout the longer races is key to victory. Combine this with the pre-race options for choosing tires, transmissions, and wing types in accordance to changing weather conditions, and it makes for an authentic racing experience. If you are a fan of racers, this is definitely worth checking out.

Reflections: I was pleasantly surprised by our Nigel! I'm not a racer fan at all but I could really see the appeal to this. The game looks good, plays even better and the licensing just adds to the authenticity of the experience. The music (which really doesn't fit the game) would be more akin to *Turrican* or *Flimbo's Quest* on the Commodore 64. That said, the two tracks on offer are quality and there is the option to turn them off. The pit stop screen is pretty hilarious, with one greasemonkey grinning at you with the listless look of a serial killer. Pit Stop Man doesn't sleep… he waits. As a gem of a racer on the system, *Danny Sullivan's Indy Heat* has opposition on the grid. – JE



A Nightmare on Elm Street

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Oct. 1990
Developer: Rare
Publisher: LJN
Players: 1-4 (simultaneous)
Special Features: NES Four Score / Satellite compatible
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★½

Based on the horror film series, it's up to teens to collect the scattered bones of Freddy Krueger to prevent the supernatural killer from terrorizing Elm Street. Starting out on the street, players must use a jump and punch to contend with clichéd horror enemies like snakes, bats, and zombies. One of several locations on the street (houses, cemetery, and junkyard) can be entered in order to engage that level. Inside the location, players will have to deal with ghoulish enemies while collecting all the bones on the level to move onto the next location. Before the end of the level, players will have to deal with a boss battle in the form of Freddy Krueger's head with wings, or his arm/claw, etc. After defeating the level, players will go back to the street to find the next random location. The gameplay of platforming and punching enemies is simple enough, however a nice twist keeps the festivities lively. A sleep meter will constantly drain as the player is inside locations. Players may collect cups of coffee to keep the meter up, but if it empties the player will "dream" and the level will transform its look as well as its enemies into more difficult counterparts. If players collect power-up icons, while sleeping they will be able to play as up to three different "Dream Warrior" forms with ranged attacks: magician (spells), ninja (throwing stars), and a javelin-wielding athlete. These forms are very useful against the difficult bosses. While dreaming, players can find a boombox to "wake up" and revert the stage back, but if not done in time Freddy will appear for a mini-battle. While the title could be a bit more varied in its gameplay and enemy types, with good controls, solid music, a unique structure, and up to four simultaneous players, you couldn't dream up something that much better for translating this horror movie license to the NES.

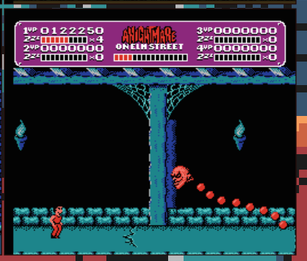
Reflections: Along with *Friday the 13th*, this horror movie series was a very surprising choice for an NES game license. Like its LJN brother, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* doesn't have a glowing reputation in the modern age – and most of that criticism is a bit unfair. It's not easy to adapt a violent R-rated movie franchise into a platformer, let alone while trying to maintain the tone and structure of a slasher film series while doing so. Sure, a lot of the enemies are just bats and zombies, but the sleep meter and Dream Warrior forms the player can take on are an ingenious way of incorporating the dreamy/nightmarish qualities of the film. This is also the only platformer on the system to support three or four simultaneous players, and while it's more a curiosity than an exhilarating experience, it manages to emulate the movie series yet again by having a group of teens battling Freddy Krueger. Call it a "Rare" success! And yes, I deserve to be stabbed by Freddy's claws for that pun. – PC

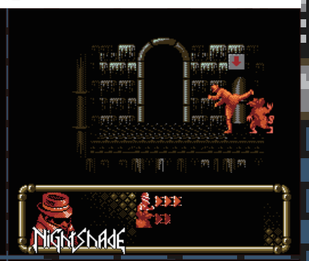
Nightshade

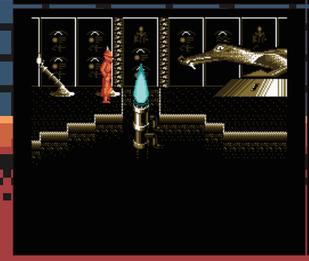
Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: Jan. 1992
Developer: Beam Software
Publisher: Ultra Games
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★

This very ambitious point-and-click adventure has added beat 'em up action. Super villain Sutekh reigns supreme until our mysterious trench coat-wearing gumshoe Nightshade rises to the challenge! Immediately the player is forced into peril: tied to a chair next to explosives about to go boom! After this deep end tutorial in learning the character movement controls, escaping the sewer prison is next which teaches the point-and-click interface (icons are displayed for each action such as examine, combine, pick up, etc.). Dispatching foes and solving puzzles for the local denizens increases the player's popularity meter – a unique feature which opens up more of the city to explore the higher it gets. However, puzzles are more fun to solve than the lukewarm fighting, which boils down to jumping all over the screen while hurling uppercuts wildly. Our hero has four lives, and each time his health hits zero the player is treated to a deathtrap puzzle screen. Whether he is strapped to a conveyor belt of doom or tied up above hungry dogs – they are great to watch. Working out the puzzle lets the game continue (albeit with less popularity). The point-and-click aspect is quite clunky, but once the player masters it, there is a fun romp to be had in the stylishly realized crime-ridden city. The dialogue at times is hilarious – everyone calls our hero Lampshade and he has to constantly correct them. One major gripe is the giant quit button that adorns the interface, which if accidentally pressed, resets the game completely with no warning. Even despite its greatest faux pas (not having any save/password system), the game is a breath of fresh air and has a staggering amount of content that is a welcome addition to the NES library.

Reflections: The point-and-click mainstay of the game is akin to *Maniac Mansion*, but the beat 'em up sections feel tacked on. The fighting is unbalanced – easy one moment, impossible the next. How an adventure game like this doesn't have a save feature is beyond me. The main amount of time you will spend in the Metro City universe is examining absolutely everything – every brick, squirrel and hobo, as many puzzles can be obscure (I won't bemoan anyone who has a cheeky game FAQ stashed away just in case). Juxtapose that with the really awkward point-and-click interface (where's an NES mouse when we all own Miracle Piano keyboards!), and at times frustration prevails. With practice though, it eventually becomes less time consuming. The deathtrap screens are genius – imagine a parody of camp 1960s *Batman* crossed with the film noir goofiness of *Dick Tracy*. Rarely does being near death seem more fun, and it's a shame there isn't more of them! Add in the sarcasm and strange charm of cartoon *The Tick* for dialogue, and that pretty much sums up the weird and wonderful world of *Nightshade*. – JE







Ninja Crusaders

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Dec. 1990
Developer: NMK
Publisher: American Sammy
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★⯪

Players take control of a ninja in this side-scrolling action game. The ninja is armed with one of four weapons that can be switched off via items picked up in the level – throwing star, chain-sickle, staff, and sword. These are used to take out the various robotic soldiers and enemies. Each weapon has a different range of attack and strength. They also have an ability to transform the player's ninja into a creature with unique abilities: tiger (throwing star), scorpion (chain-sickle), falcon (staff), and dragon (sword) via holding the B button. Switching back and forth to access the creature abilities and back again to the ninja during the levels provides a somewhat fresh gameplay feature. However, the rest of the game doesn't stand up that well. Music and graphics are both average, and stage bosses are uninteresting in their appearance and attacks. The biggest flaw, though, are one-hit deaths in lieu of a health bar. Many enemies have unpredictable and very quick movement patterns, and some have projectile attacks, which makes them harder to approach without getting hit. This makes the game a chore to play through, even with continues available. Players may find themselves transforming into the falcon and simply flying around enemies and through stages, reflective of the fairly unfun ventures.

Reflections: The animal transformations in this game are hilarious. The high-jumping tiger that punches with its paw is honestly humorous, and its foil is the extremely slow scorpion who cannot really jump at all. For some reason, though, the scorpion can zip around under water like a squid.

I know that *Ninja Gaiden* was a smash hit in 1989, and that it spawned several NES ninja games afterwards, but I hope that the producers of these games learned that just because a successful game was released using a specific theme, that doesn't mean that any other game released with that same theme would also be a smash. Feel free to read the next review now for the true ninja game on the NES. – PC

Ninja Gaiden

Shadow Warriors *(PAL)*
Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Mar. 1989
Developer: Tecmo
Publisher: Tecmo
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★★⯪

The ninja Ryu Hayabusa sets out to avenge his father's death and defeat an evil demon in this thrilling action-platformer. Armed with a sword, the player must move through side-scrolling stages hacking ground and air enemies, such as street thugs, soldiers, bats, birds, and lots more. Lamps and lanterns are littered throughout the stages which can be destroyed to reveal items such as extra energy, limited invincibility, and "spiritual strength" to power obtainable secondary weapons. These consist of the throwing star, windmill throwing star, upward fire-wheel attack, and a devastating spinning jump and slash. These are able to be used via B + UP as long as there are spiritual strength points remaining. Platforming elements can present quite a challenge, as a single enemy touch can send Ryu flying back, sometimes into a pit. Gameplay encourages a quick and precise approach, since in most spots enemies will constantly respawn unless the player drives forward, creating a challenging yet at times frustrating experience. The tight attack controls, secondary weapons, and unique ability to cling to and jump off walls helps make the experience very immersive, and really sells the ninja-esque tone of the game. Enemy bosses are all entirely different with macabre and demonic looks and interesting patterns that must be learned to defeat them – the later ones being very difficult. Fortunately, the game shows mercy in allowing continues after all lives are gone. Even so, this remains one of the more challenging games released on the NES. Presentation is outstanding, as innovative use of nicely drawn, anime-style cinema cutscenes between stages lays out a nice and complex story. An excellent and memorable soundtrack rounds out the rest of this unforgettable game.

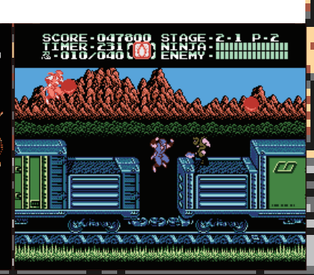
Reflections: Geez Tecmo, would it kill you for a password feature? The final act of the game is one of the most grueling gaming experiences I've suffered through. Even if you're a honed and seasoned *Ninja Gaiden* player, the last stages of the final act of the game are relentless, with constant enemies and precarious pit-jumping o'plenty. As extra punishment, death in the last segment of the game puts you way back further than usual, forcing you to replay the same difficult sections over again. I never owned *Ninja Gaiden* as a kid, but I borrowed and rented it often, but I could never defeat the game until I was in college. I'm not sure if that level of difficulty is beneficial or not. To me, *Ninja Gaiden* is a near-perfect game, but having a slightly fairer challenge curve may have pushed it to that ultimate five star level, in my view. The sequels are less magical and "necessary" than the original, so I'm glad Tecmo stopped at "3" and didn't just cash in on the same game over and over again. *cough* *Capcom* *cough *Mega Man* – PC

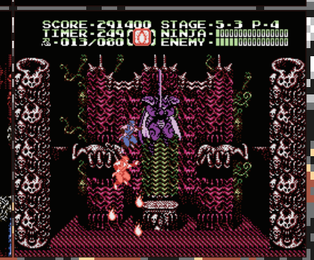
Ninja Gaiden II: The Dark Sword of Chaos

Shadow Warriors II *(PAL)*
Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: May 1990
Developer: Tecmo
Publisher: Tecmo
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★⯪

Ryu is back in another side-scrolling adventure one year after the events of the first game, this time hunting down the demonic Ashtar. Players can control the quick moving ninja who has access to a basic sword attack and a secondary weapon via B + UP. These sub-weapons are important to many boss strategies and include such ones as simple shurikens to large fire wheels. These are not infinite, but require the player to replenish a secondary gauge throughout levels to continue using them via power-ups collected from destroyed lanterns/objects hanging in the levels . Ryu is also quite acrobatic and can jump and latch onto walls, allowing him to flip back and forth and reach new heights. Players can scale the walls up and down to fine tune their jumping off point, which is a very nice addition to this entry in the series. One of the coolest abilities in the game is the power-up that allows Ryu to create a red clone of himself that will attack, jump, and use secondary weapons as he does. This opens up a lot of possible avenues of attack in a game where knowing the level structure and enemy placement is key. Graphics are quite nice, with some excellent scrolling effects on train levels, dripping walls of slime in the caves, and a fine attention to detail in the more demonic looking stages later in the game. This doesn't even touch upon the excellent cutscenes used between stages to tell the rather complex story. The game in general delves into a darker theme than the prior entry rather quickly, where even standard enemies are basically nonhuman, with Jason-like slashers, demon dogs, and cleaver-wielding hunchbacks. Stage environments take on the appearance of foreboding castles, hellish enclaves, and cave mazes rather quickly, leaving the cities and mountains far behind. Tricky spots, like platforming in changing wind and new bosses with tough patterns, require precise timing and ensure this title maintains notoriously difficult, while a high energy soundtrack keeps players pumped and playing. It's quite possibly the most polished entry in the series.

Reflections: It may not be as fondly remembered as the first in the general consensus, but I always enjoyed this title more as it really felt like they tweaked just a few things to really get it right. The cut scenes have a touch more detail, and while they probably didn't help sell this game quite as well as the original, they were still a relatively unique touch and a great way to convey a simple story in an 8-bit platformer. – IF



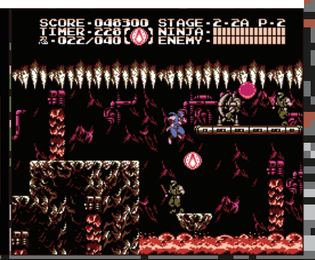


Ninja Gaiden III: The Ancient Ship of Doom

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Aug. 1991
Developer: Tecmo
Publisher: Tecmo
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★

Ryu returns to find Irene Lew's killer and investigate an interdimensional rift powering bio-noids in the final entry of the series. Armed again with a sword, Ryu will hack, slash, and travel through several "acts," which are broken up into several, smaller individual areas (most are horizontal, and some vertical). Ryu must face down enemies both on the ground and in the air, including soldiers, ninjas, and various robotic foes. While they can be defeated with a single hit, it's the placement of the enemies, especially near precarious pits, that makes the proceedings daunting. To traverse levels and swiftly engage/avoid baddies, Ryu can grab/climb walls as well as grab, hang from, flip onto, and hand-walk on pipes/vines. Ryu also has a secondary weapon available that can be gained by destroying crystal balls and gaining the dropped icon. Activated via B + UP, these include a downward fireball, an upward fire throw, a windmill-throwing star, invincible fire wheel, and an upward/downward wave attack. These can be used as long as Ryu's ninja power meter isn't empty; it can be refilled via icons in crystal balls. Crystal balls may also contain a max increase for the power meter, increasing the length of Ryu's primary attack, and a potion to partially refill Ryu's health meter – and he'll need it. This is an extremely difficult game, with enemies always in the way, and there are often times where surrounding enemies will swarm the player, making it nearly impossible not to sustain some damage. If this isn't enough, stage hazards such as spikes, quicksand and goo that Ryu can fall into, and rising flames in vertical levels mean the player has to play almost perfectly in order to move on. Health is not replenished for new areas, and the scarcity of potions means players cannot afford to take any extraneous damage, or else they'll start several areas back when losing a life. It's unforgiving and frustrating, and limited continues adds to the pain. It's surprising that the stage bosses aren't nearly as difficult as the areas that precede them. Graphics are superb here, with nicely defined enemies and excellent backgrounds. Controls are spot on and the rocking, moody soundtrack sets the tone nicely. The twisting story is presented in cinematic cutscenes, which will entice players to want to continue to see the next part, if they can make it.

Reflections: *The Ancient Ship of Doom* is still a quality title, if over-the-top in difficulty. This was the last original Ninja Gaiden game until *Ninja Gaiden* (2004) on the Xbox. *Ninja Gaiden Trilogy* was released on the SNES (and PC Engine in Japan), a compilation which updated the graphics but also unfortunately stiffened the controls and swapped out the beautiful NES music tracks for inferior ones. Maybe Tecmo wanted out of the ninja market for a while? There's no other reason for producing such limited quantities of a third game in a series when the first two sold like ninja hot-cakes. – PC

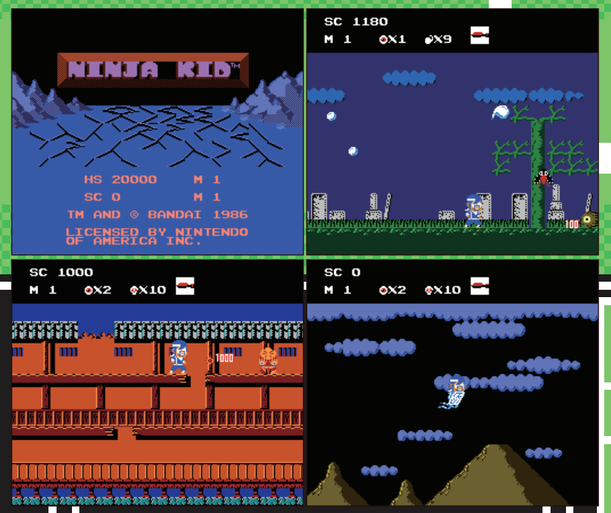


Ninja Kid

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Oct. 1986
Developer: TOSE
Publisher: Bandai
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⋆

In this simple-seeming ninja action game with a surprising amount of variety, players begin on an overhead map dotted with white temples and a yellow hut. The goal is to collect a scroll from one of the white temples, which will then activate a boss battle in the yellow hut. When players enter a white temple, they are immediately transported into one of four different side-scrolling stages: Dog Fight, Guerrilla Warfare, Poison Field, or Blazing Inferno. In Dog Fight, players fly along on a kite and must take out four enemies with throwing knives. Guerrilla Warfare tasks players with killing 10 enemies while on foot. Poison Field levels require the player not only to handle enemies but also capture 10 ghosts. Lastly, Blazing Inferno levels require players to lead a floating fire spirit to light all the candles in a level. The variety presented is quite nice. After achieving the goal, a scroll may appear and then two doors will appear; one will take the player back to the map to continue their quest while the other will trip them up and force them to face a mini boss, such as a cyclops or skeletons. Sometimes near the end of a level, a flute will be dropped which can come in handy later. Players continue entering white temples until they receive a scroll, and then they must head to the hut to fight a version of Shangri La. During these battles, players may summon familiars such as unicorns and yetis, if they have flutes, to help with the boss. Then the game populates another random map and play continues. The game feels sloppy, as enemies bounce around with little regard to walls or platforms. Controls are a bit slippery and one-hit kills feel cheap and frustrating. Even Ninja Kid's basic weapon of throwing knives lacks variety. All said, however, the game manages to be a little more fun than it initially seems thanks to creativity and charm. It's not good, but certainly not the worst.

Reflections: *Ninja Kid*, *Chubby Cherub*, and *Dragon Power* are all obviously cut from the same developmental cloth. All of these games were based on anime properties in their home country, and given the era, this probably speaks a great deal about their lack of quality. At least in this title you can go from fighting ninjas to Frankenstein's monster in a flash. – IF



Nintendo World Cup

Genre: Sports, Action
Release Date: Dec. 1990
Developer: Technōs Japan
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-4 (simultaneous)
Special Features: NES Four Score / Satellite compatible, Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

Take to the pitch in this action-packed and utterly ridiculous take on the sport of soccer. In terms of game modes, there's an option to play exhibition games or seasons against other teams in a set order. There are 13 international teams (with different attributes) to choose from, with six players plus goalie for each side. The player only controls one team member but can set multiple AI options before the match for their teammates. On the horizontal field, controls are simple with one button for pass and another for shoot. If the player is not in control of the ball but a teammate is, then pressing the corresponding button will either call for a shot from that teammate or a pass to the player. That may sound fairly normal, but if one is looking for a traditional game of soccer this won't be it; special "super kicks" and "high power kicks" requiring timing and positioning are the order of the day in order to have better scoring opportunities. There are no penalties for physical violence when taking out enemies on defense via tackling/sliding. You can even KO opponents and leave their bodies on the field for an entire half! On both offense and defense, a communications box on the bottom of the screen lets you know what teammates are thinking of doing, which is helpful in planning ahead. Besides no penalties and offsides, basic soccer elements like trapping, headers, throw-ins, etc., are all here. The game truly shows its strengths when played multiplayer cooperatively or competitively for up to four players using the Four Score or Satellite adapter. Only some slight choppiness and sprite flicker harm a really solid alternative sports title.

Reflections: If those characters look familiar, that's because this game is technically part of the Kunio-kun series along with *River City Ransom*, *Super Dodge Ball*, and *Crash 'n' The Boys*. This title in particular was published by Nintendo, as it seemed a great fit for the newly released Four Score multitap adapter. I own this game on three platforms and would happily buy it for another. – IF

Nobunaga's Ambition

Genre: Strategy
Release Date: June 1989
Developer: Koei
Publisher: Koei
Players: 1-8
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★

Take control of a daimyo ruling a fiefdom in 16th century feudal Japan. The goal is to take over the other fiefdoms and unify Japan as its supreme warlord. It's a complicated war and politics game, demanding patience and intellect (thankfully, there are different difficulty levels). In most menus outside battle, the D-pad inputs numbers and "Y" or "N" answers, allowing complex menus. To start, you roll RPG-style stats for your daimyo and select your fief, which are all based upon historical people and places. An assistant page narrates the game with prompts and pertinent information. On your turn, you see a menu screen showing your character's statistics as well as your fief's, like "Morale" and "Debt." There are a whopping 21 commands, including "Bribe," "War," "Tax," plus game preferences. Fighting isn't the only skill you'll need: you oversee agriculture, economy, engineering, and more. Darker actions are available, including the hiring of spies and ninja assassins. The fief's gold and rice finance war, but peasants may revolt if you tax them too much, so balance is needed. Battles take place on a grid of land squares, covering several screens. The terrain affects where you may move and buildings denote towns and castles. No soldiers are shown, only numbers and flag icons signifying them. You position your units, then you're given a menu of orders like moving and attacking. Fighting takes days in game time, consuming resources, food and men, and you're defeated if you run out of either. Your daimyo fights his own wars, and if his command unit is killed, you lose. The graphics and sound are minimal, but serviceable. There are musical tones indicating good or bad outcomes, and outside battle there are tiny animations showing events, like storms or plagues. Despite the clunky interface, this game has much to appreciate.

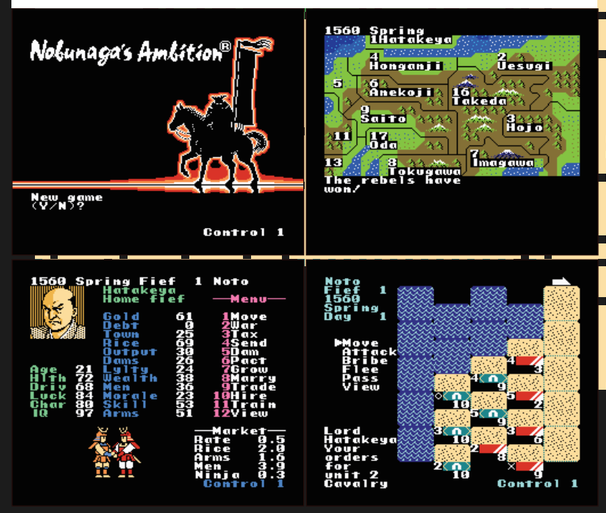
Reflections: *Nobunaga's Ambition* is a large, long series of games with new titles available in the United States, even up to modern days. When I saw the text-heavy and clunky controls of the NES version, I suspected that it was originally a PC game and soon found that I was right. In Japan, it's the second in the series, *Nobunaga no Yabou: Zenkokuban*, which was ported to many computers and consoles. Eventually I tracked down some screenshots of the first *Nobunaga's Ambition* from 1983 on the Fujitsu Micro 7 computer, and that version is made up largely of kanji text and crude geometric maps. Yet even from that, I could see how complex, unique, and (most likely) influential it was for the time. – KN

Nobunaga's Ambition II

Genre: Strategy
Release Date: Apr. 1991
Developer: Koei
Publisher: Koei
Players: 1-4
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★★⋆

This military strategy game sequel has depth, requiring diligence. There are five difficulty levels and two modes: one set after Oda Nobunaga has claimed most of Japan, and one before. You must unite/conquer Japan, so being Nobunaga is easiest. You control your daimyo and his samurai governors who rule fiefs. Samurai responsibilities are administrative to bellicose, overseeing commerce, agriculture, and other tasks besides war. Once laden, a samurai won't be available until later, dictating how many actions you can initiate per turn. Yet keeping samurai engaged constantly is risky; if all the fief's samurai are busy they're unprepared defense. If attacked, you'll either lose the fief automatically or suffer a tough battle. Governors and daimyos have identical menus, except only daimyos make new samurai and diplomatic ties. Although samurai and fiefs may shuffle around, you're the daimyo: lose him, lose the game. In battle you're either attacking or defending. Armies lose when they run out of food or men, or their commander is defeated. The battlefield is a hexagonal grid and units are squares with symbols denoting type and number of men. Units have different talents; cavalry are fast while infantry have stealth. Terrain affects movement, and nighttime darkness obscures enemies. If overwhelmed, defenders can retreat to their castle, requiring you to ram its gates, which takes time, and your units bottleneck upon entry. It's a battle of attrition, and there's danger of running out of food. The game is composed of maps and menus, but the details are impressive, with individual portraits for samurai and icons showing events. The music and sound are pleasant, yet there's an option to silence it. Conquering Japan is a lengthy endeavor, and you may tire of it eventually, but if Nobunaga did it for real, how hard is playing it on the NES?

Reflections: This sequel fixes the problems of its NES predecessor, featuring better art and vastly improved controls. An issue with the first game is that it gives you menu options on the map screen for movement instead of using the D-pad. The sequel does let you move units with the D-pad directly, like you'd expect. The menus are also a lot cleaner, having been organized into categories, while the previous entry had every action placed on screen in a long wall of text (it's confusing and ugly). *Nobunaga's Ambition II* has SNES and PC versions (among others), using the title *Nobunaga's Ambition: Lord of Darkness* or just *Lord of Darkness*. If your favorite console or computer has one, it may be worth trying it out. – KN



North and South

Genre: Strategy, Action
Release Date: Dec. 1990
Developer: Infogrames
Ported by: Kemco
Publisher: Kemco
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★⯪

This slightly comedic Civil War game pits the North against the South in the United States in 1861-1865. Play is on a map of the Eastern United States, divided up into state territories and some towns. Players control military units, and the objective is to wipe out the other side to end the war. Many options are available: playing as the North or South, choosing the starting year (1861-1864), which affects the map and number of units for each side, the difficulty of each side for the side-scrolling stages, and three more. These include turning on/off random Mexican/Indian attacks on units on the west side of the map, turning off bonus units being dropped off to North Carolina every so often, and weather that can prevent units from moving. On a turn-by-turn basis, each side can move their military units to available territories nearby to take control. Each unit consists of six infantry soldiers, three cavalry soldiers, and a cannon. When one unit moves to an enemy-occupied space, a battle begins. These take place on a large map with the units of each side facing each other on the extremes. Both sides control one unit type at a time, and can switch off and attack with each. There's less strategy here than frenetic moving, switching, and attacking with different units until one side is entirely defeated. It's fun but not complex, and besides obstacles like houses, trees, and bridges on the battlefield, this mode is very shallow. The means for gaining more units comes from the five towns connected to the railroad. The more that are controlled, the more gold is gained per turn (five bags of gold creates a new unit on the map). Enemy railroad towns and trains can be taken over by playing an awkward, timed side-scrolling section. The player/CPU will run left-to-right towards the goal and take out enemy soldiers one at a time standing in their way with throwing knives and fists when the knives run out. These are more troublesome than fun, and only seem to exist to extend the game. There isn't too much complexity overall, and most games will run under 15 minutes, so it's best played against a friend. There's some fun to be had with this quirky game, but don't go in expecting a historical simulation.

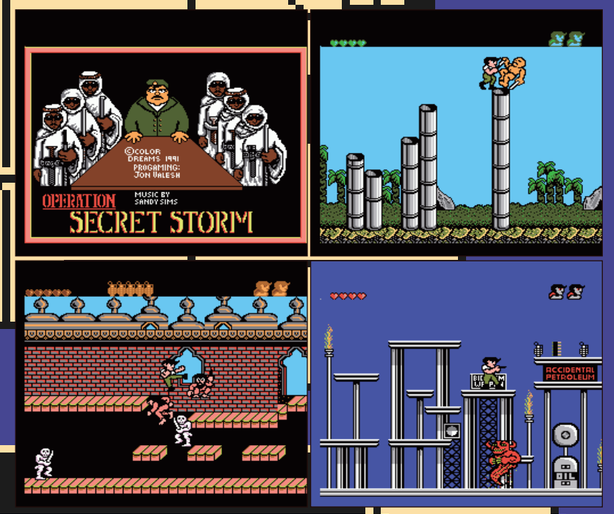
Reflections: This is based upon a humorous Belgian comic book that took place during the the Old West/Civil War: *Les Tuniques Bleues* (*The Bluecoats*). The sense of humor can be seen in the menu screen, where you can click the pointer on the photographer's butt cheeks and see him flinch. It's a strange release for sure, but it's one that really helps define both the breadth and uniqueness of the NES library. – PC

Operation Secret Storm

Genre: Beat 'em Up
Release Date: 1991
Developer: Color Dreams
Publisher: Color Dreams
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Rare
★

In this side-scrolling beat 'em up the player takes on the role of Agent George and invades Iraq to take on cartoony Arab stereotypes like "Jihads" in hand-to-hand combat on the way to facing Saddam Hussein. Players will travel on a single plane until coming across an enemy or more, and then the screen will stop scrolling until they are defeated. The player has a few different attacks at their disposal: punch, kick (B + UP), jump kick, and short knee attack (B + UP). However, the jump kick is the only one that is reliable due to the lower percentage of being hit back by the enemies versus trying a ground attack, where you'll most likely exchange damage and lose hearts. Controls are imprecise, floaty, and hit detection inaccurate, as half the time it's unsure whether or not you have inflicted damage. The limited sound effects confound the issue. The one-on-one fights against bedouins or naked (!) tribesmen soon becomes two and three-on-one. Finding grenades or hand gun bullets can be a change of pace, but only a quick one. The monotony is only broken up by hysterical boss fights against desert eagles or rapid spit-fire camels.

Reflections: Oh Color Dreams, how I love thee. They had absolutely no fear of reprisal not only for their poorly programmed games, but also their stereotypical and borderline racist game characters. This game of course was a cash-in attempt with the Persian Gulf War and "Operation Desert Storm." I'm guessing it didn't help much, since Color Dreams was a third rate NES game developer whose games weren't accessible to 95 percent of the public. Fun fact: the game's protagonist is named "Agent George," an obvious connection to then-president George H.W. Bush. However, the character in the game doesn't resemble the president, but the manual does have a very funny depiction of the man who is obviously supposed to be the Prez, but in Rambo mode. – PC



Operation Wolf

Genre: Shooting Gallery
Release Date: May 1989
Developer: Taito,
Ported by: Daiei Seisakusho
Publisher: Taito
Players: 1
Special Features: Zapper (optional)
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

Players take control of a Special Forces soldier out to rescue hostages in this first-person shooter on rails. Armed with a machine gun and grenade launcher, the player must take out many enemy soldiers and vehicles, such as tanks, boats, and helicopters, before they can deplete the player's health bar by firing at them. Players are equipped with a very limited amount of bullets and grenades. They must be on the constant lookout to find and shoot ammunition magazines and grenade power-ups on the screen (some are also hidden in animals) to replenish these, as well as health pick-ups. Players must also take care to avoid shooting innocent bystanders/hostages and prevent them from being killed. True to its arcade roots, the title's six levels are short but action-packed and challenging, as the player will be constantly reacting to enemies while seeking out additional ammo. Health does not replenish between rounds, which constitutes an even greater challenge, although the game does supply a couple of continues. Presentation is very good, as the graphics and sounds are translated well from the arcade game, and the cutscene stills in between levels move the game along with its story. Unfortunately, the game is not fully playable with a light gun, as automatic fire is required to be successful, which the Zapper cannot do. Playing with a cross-hair target using a controller, with adjustable speed, is more adequate, but not as fulfilling as it would be using a controller that could simulate a machine gun.

Reflections: *Operation Wolf* is outstanding in the arcade. It featured a mounted Uzi with force feedback that simulated machine gun recoil. My father would always play this at the Star Port arcade at Woodbridge Center mall, while giving me a dollar or two to go off on my own and play whatever I wanted to in the dark and gloomy arcade. I'd usually end up playing *Ikari Warriors* or the excellent *Spy Hunter* cockpit cabinet. Looking back, it probably wasn't the best idea to let a small child go off on his own where grifters and bikers would often hang out, but hey, it's not like I was kidnapped and killed. No harm, no foul, Dad! – PC

Orb-3D

Genre: Paddle-and-Ball, Puzzle
Release Date: Oct. 1990
Developer: The Software Toolworks
Publisher: Hi Tech Expressions
Players: 1
Special Features: 3D Mode (optional)
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★⯪

As pilot of the Millenium Orb, you must stop the evil Krohn from destroying the galaxy by traveling into a black hole comprising 30 Enigma Chambers (levels). Each is a puzzle on a dotted grid, with your score at the top and your fuel gauge at the right. You command two paddle-like "force shields" on the left and right edges of the screen, moving them up and down in parallel to bat your Orb between them. Pressing A causes the Orb to dive into the quadrant it's flying over, hitting objects that may be there. It's unique but extremely awkward, making the controls your adversary. Catch the Orb off-center, and it'll bounce at an uncontrollable angle. Missing the Orb wastes a large amount of fuel, and the fuel gauge is a constant countdown to doom. Furthermore, frustrating Chasers sometimes arrive to steal fuel by ramming you. You can press B to visit Vern's Orb-O-Rama, a gas station puzzle where you refuel by flying into slots in a hexagonal grid, using your score as currency. Continues are infinite, essential for the trial and error of learning how to play stages. The true innovation of the game isn't the 3D, but the creative levels, each having its own sprites and rules that you must quickly assess and solve. Greatly simplified, you need to hit objects on the grid in order or the right number of times. But how? By popping bubbles, hitting bowling pins, hatching butterflies, playing a card-matching game, using the orb to spell, and more. Giant floating monster heads appear occasionally between screens, and you must poke them in the eyes. However, only the puzzles provide variety - the entire game has a black background, and there's only one repetitive song during the action. Ironically, the "3D" meant to make this title stand out suffocates its strengths instead.

Reflections: This cart came with GrenoVision™ 3D glasses, which are tough to find, even if they're not in demand. They aren't anaglyphic, having a dark lens and a transparent lens. GrenoVision™ was used for this game's predecessor, *Beyond the Black Hole* by The Software Toolworks for DOS and Commodore 64. It's similar, although there's no backstory about Krohn. It's just a shame that in chasing a 3D gimmick, the designers neglected their best ideas - the puzzles themselves. – KN

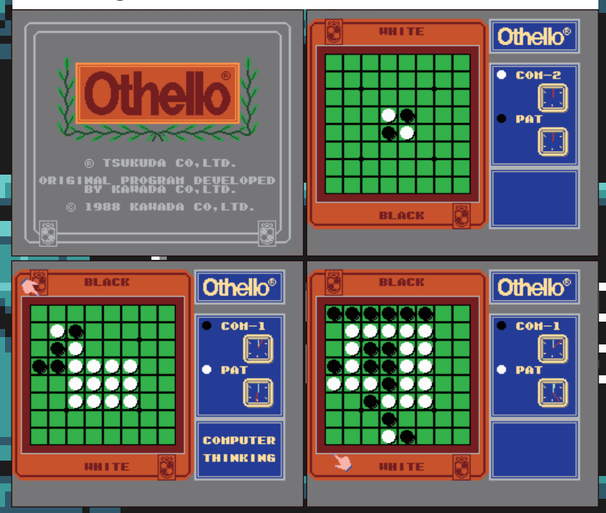
Othello

Genre: Board Game, Strategy
Release Date: Dec. 1988
Developer: HAL Laboratory
Publisher: Acclaim Entertainment
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⯪

In this serviceable port of the strategy board game (based on Reversi), two players place black and white-colored discs on an 8-by-8 game board grid, alternating one each at a time. Players may select a computer or human opponent, the difficulty level, and the time limit of the game. The object of the game is to have more of your colored discs on the board by trapping your opponent's discs and converting them to your color. Play begins with four discs placed in the middle of the board – two white placed diagonally opposite two black. Players must place a disc adjacently on the side of an opponent's disc. It will flip the color of any opponent disc that is trapped on opposite sides horizontally, vertically, and/or diagonally. If one cannot be placed in such a manner, play will be passed to the opponent. The winner is the player who has more of their colored discs on the board when all the spaces on the board are filled or no more moves can be made. As the saying goes, it takes a minute to learn and a lifetime to master. It emulates the board game perfectly, and there's even the option to take back a move with the B button, which is needed since even the easiest CPU opponent is challenging. Your mileage will vary depending on your love of the timeless game.

Reflections: *Othello* was big for about a year when this game was released. The board game was pushed on commercials, and I even ended up getting a travel-size game, which I remember playing about five times total with my sister. I just never got into it, and it's telling that *Othello* isn't exactly in everyone's game board cupboard today. I always wondered if this was based upon the Shakespearean story of the same name. Can anyone help me out? – PC

I love Reversi (the generic name for *Othello*) and played it all the time with my family. There is a great amount of strategy involved, once players come to grips with important concepts of board control and which spaces are more valuable or dangerous to occupy. The NES version is really quite decent, though flipping a whole mess of pieces on a board with a real opponent is just more fun. Reversi games are known for being good programing tests for coders when it comes to AI. Because of the game's structure, it's actually difficult to make an AI that plays poorly unless one just codes it to make random legal moves. – IF



Overlord

Genre: Strategy
Release Date: Jan. 1993
Developer: Probe Software
Publisher: Virgin Games
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

Become the supreme master of space in this ambitious real-time strategy sim. Four alien opponents can be chosen, which reflects the size and difficulty of the game. The main screen gives the player several options from attacking, buying more ships, stats, spying on enemies, and terraforming planets. The stats icon gives important information about the current state of the empire and allows the tax rate to be altered – a valuable source of income. At the foot of the screen is an info ticker bar that feeds current events going on the galaxy. There are a multitude of machines to purchase that help to grow and maintain colonies. An atmosphere processor terraforms planets so the player can colonize them, which is the main way to progress the game. As planets grow, purchasing farming stations produces more food to match the consumption, which eventually leads to a bigger population to use and more importantly more taxable citizens. Formed planets turn into a specific land mass which ultimately controls the next move; a tropical landscape for example is just begging for farms so it can sustain other planets. Terraforming is very much a lottery, as that desperately needed city could turn into a barren desert. All actions take a number of days to process, so planning in advance is where the strategy lies. Danger comes in the form of the chosen alien who threatens and attacks sporadically. Turret guns and missiles can be purchased for planetary defense, and once attacked the game turns into a top-down shooter where the player controls a cross hair to defend against the onslaught. Attacking is also an option in the form of using battlecruisers, fitting them with an array of missiles, entering another top-down arena controlling the ship while taking on the enemy base. An interesting take on space strategy is let down by its unforgiving complexity from the start, including being able to accidentally purchase a building for the wrong planet, which can set the colony back until the next pay cycle. The display has metallic space panels full of flashy looking instruments that do add to the atmosphere, as does the sound with its whirrs and bips. Ultimately though, a little too much clunk and not enough excitement let the package down.

Reflections: Koei rules the roost when it comes to overly elaborate strategy givings, but *Overlord* makes a valiant attempt. Just swap the word feudal and province for alien and planet. Trial and error are still in play here, with the latter triumphing more often until you get the hang of goings on, which will take a while as the game is quite daunting. The top-down shooter part is a welcome addition – it is basically *Missile Command* during the defense sections (and you get to choose the weapons), which is a feast for the eyes after being subjected to clicking on random buttons relentlessly for hours. – JE

P.O.W.: Prisoners of War

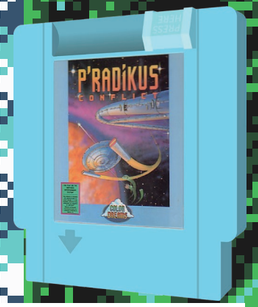
Genre: Beat 'em Up
Release Date: Sept. 1989
Developer: SNK
Publisher: SNK
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

Break out of prison as a special forces soldier and then beat up other soldiers with your fists and feet in this snappy brawler. This port of the arcade beat 'em up translates most of the action faithfully, as players punch, kick, and jump kick enemy soldiers, knife wielders, machine gunners, and even soldiers throwing grenades. The graphics and animation are nice, and the beatdown gameplay itself is fun, if a little shallow in the types of enemies and how you take them down. Especially enjoyable, though, is how far the enemies fly across the screen when you knock them out. You can acquire and use knives, M-16s, and even grenades in your quest as you obliterate green berets, motorcycle warriors, and even a helicopter. The game, as the arcade version was, is fairly short, and the challenge is limited given the ability to continue. To help extend the game, SNK at least added bonus rooms/areas that can be entered to gain power-ups and extra health. Lacking, however, is the two-player simultaneous mode that the arcade version enjoyed. It's not the finest example of the beat 'em up genre, but good enough for a bare-knuckled whirl or two.

Reflections: I loved *P.O.W.* as a kid. I remember my father giving me $5 in quarters at Perth Amboy Cinemas, and between the dozen or so arcade games they had in the ticket area, I usually ended up spending most of my quarters on this one. I had the opportunity to get the NES version as a child and I somewhat regretted it afterwards. It's not that I didn't like the game, but being that I did not have the fortune of having a large game collection, it would have been better to get a game that was longer and had a higher replay value. Oh well, maybe I should have just rented this at the local Stop & Go convenience store for the weekend instead. – PC

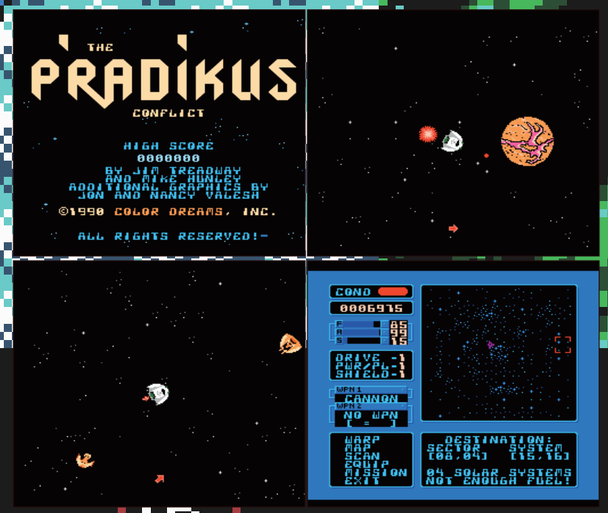
The P'Radikus Conflict

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: 1990
Developer: Color Dreams
Publisher: Color Dreams
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Rare
★★★⯪



Take control of a space cruiser on missions to take out the P'Radikan aliens in this free-roaming overhead space shooter. You start out with a basic ship which can rotate and thrust around in open space with fairly realistic physics. Your ship is equipped with armor, a regenerating shield, a limited fuel supply (which must be replenished or the game ends), warp drive (travel to different sectors via menu) and primary/secondary weapons like cannons, lasers, missiles, mines, etc. Destroying enemy ships results in cash which can be used to purchase weapon, shield, power, and warp drive upgrades. The player is given missions to destroy enemy space stations or ones that hover over a planet. They can be reached by warping and traveling to different planet systems and then eliminating them by destroying the main firing base guns. There's a lot of areas the player can explore via warping, but the variety of what is out there in the universe is pretty limited. The gameplay is solid but not perfect. A lot of the enemies will not shoot at the player's ship but rather attempt to run into them kamikaze-style. Also, the space physics is the same in space as when you're on a planet, which makes it a little difficult to take out the enemy turrets there that fire at you. It's an interesting and original shooter game that was on the right track in design, but falls a bit short in execution.

Reflections: I was semi-astonished when I started playing this game and realized the ambition involved. Here we have an NES shooter that's close to being a 2D open sandbox type of game in the vein of *Privateer* or *Elite* (which was actually an NES PAL release). The structure was there to make this a classic game: free exploration, semi-nonlinear structure, ship upgrades, and the player exploring a huge area and playing at their own pace. I thought that this might become one of my favorite NES games! Then I remembered I was playing a Color Dreams game and snapped out of my daydream. – PC

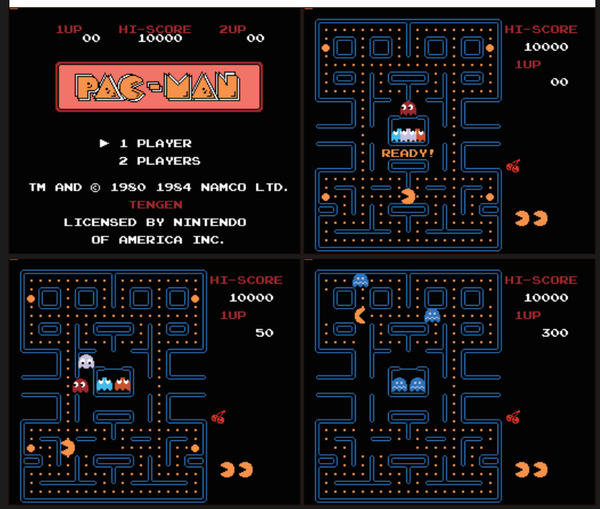


Pac-Man

Genre: Maze
Release Date: Oct. 1988
Developer: Namco
Ported by: Namco Hometek
Publisher: Tengen
Players: 1–2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed / Unlicensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

Players control the yellow pie-shaped Pac-Man on a blue maze playfield. The goal of each level is to munch all the pellets while avoiding the four colored ghosts with primitive but distinct AI: Blinky, Pinky, Inky, and Clyde. They will chase after Pac-Man, whose only recourse is to run or eat one of the four blinking power pellets. When that occurs, for a short time the ghosts will turn blue and can be eaten by Pac-Man. When eaten, the ghosts' eyes will travel back to the center ghost base on the screen to respawn. Fruit will appear periodically in the center of the level, which will give the player bonus points if eaten. Gameplay is fast, challenging, and can be very frantic, as the player must make their way through each maze while both avoiding ghosts and foreseeing future safe paths at the same time to be successful. They also must decide when/if to eat the power pellets, a precarious balance of short-term risk versus long-term level success. Patterns of movement may be employed by more sophisticated players on sets of levels, known as "keys." This and other tricks can be learned and utilized by more advanced players. Simplistic in form, in practice it is a game that is definitely more than the sum of its parts, as the iconic mascot, memorable sounds, short story cutscenes (the first ever in a video game), and smooth gameplay combine to make a fun and memorable experience. Note: The Tengen *Pac-Man* cart was released in two forms, the original licensed (gray cart) and unlicensed (black cart) versions. The games are identical.

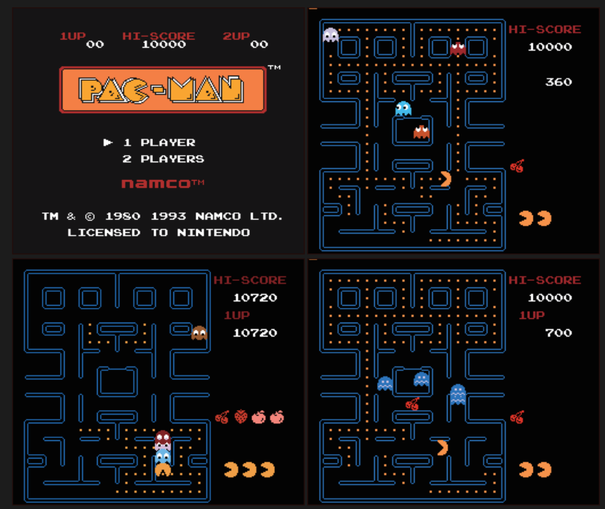
Reflections: *Pac-Man* is arguably the most important video game of all time. It not only was wildly popular and started the first real gaming franchise, but it was the first game to feature a beloved, memorable mascot character that appealed to a wide array of gamers – both young and old, male and female. This helped not only attract the first generation of gamers to the arcades, but it helped usher video games into the popular culture and make it a household word, since the Pac-Man character was marketed and appearing *everywhere*. For the first time you had toys, clothing, books, breakfast cereal, cartoons, etc. based upon a video game! This may seem like nothing now, but in the pre-Nintendo days of 1980, it's not like many people in the United States really knew what video games were, let alone the *characters* of a video game. While Pac-Man may have taken a back-seat in the past couple of decades to other video game icons such as Sonic and Mario, that lil' yellow guy will still be in gamers' hearts forever. – PC



Pac-Man

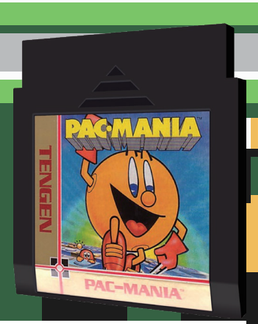
Genre: Maze
Release Date: Nov. 1993
Developer: Namco
Ported by: Namco Hometek
Publisher: Namco
Players: 1–2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★★

Review: Please see previous review entry. This title was a re-release of the Tengen version by Namco. The game itself is identical. – PC



Pac-Mania

Genre: Maze
Release Date: Jan. 1990
Developer: Namco
Ported: Westwood Studios
Publisher: Tengen
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★



A new perspective on *Pac-Man*! The beloved maze game has been given an isometric view for a 3D effect and depth to the mazes. Pac even has been given a new skill to boot: the ability to jump! This comes in handy in a pinch but certain colored ghosts, like the green and dark gray, can hop as well and catch the player in mid air. The basic goal remains the same as always: eat all the pellets to advance to the next level while avoiding the six ghostly antagonists. Power pellets can be eaten to give Pac-Man the ability to eat ghosts for a limited amount of time (their eyeballs will return to base to regenerate) and fruit are available to eat for bonus points. Overall it's an okay idea, but the inability to see the whole maze at once makes it too hard to assess the situation at any given time and react accordingly. When so much of a game is planning ahead, a full screen view is essential. As an arcade port, the transfer is decent but the visual shine of the original transfers over flat and dull to the NES, and the gorgeous mazes are definitely part of the arcade version's appeal. Other games in the series are better for a pellet fix.

Reflections: I'm a massive Namco fanboy and even I often forget this title. The arcade version is pretty but the game feels like more of a showpiece. It doesn't try anything wildly different like *Super Pac-Man* and it doesn't refine the classic gameplay like *Ms. Pac-Man* does. It isn't awful, but with so many games in the series this one isn't worth more than a few moments of your time. – IF

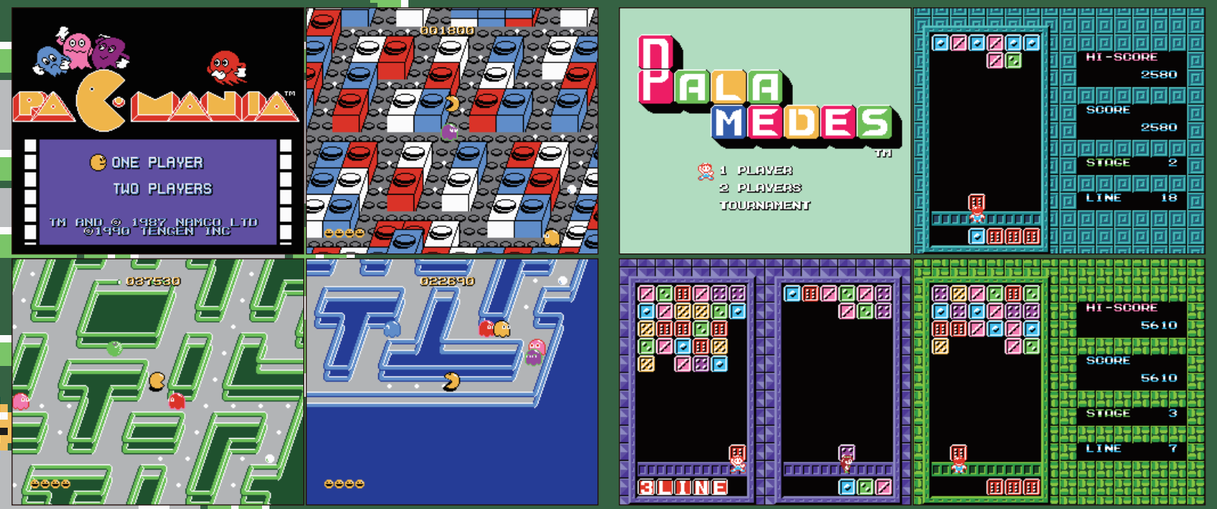
By this point in the franchise, Pac-Man's rotten corpse was being beaten with a metal pipe. When thoughts of this fondly-remembered franchise come to mind, this is probably the last game people ever think of. Hey Namco, you own other game properties! – PC

Palamedes

Genre: Puzzle
Release Date: Nov. 1990
Developer: Taito
Ported by: Natsume
Publisher: Hot-B
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

In this puzzle game, lines are cleared by making dice "hands" similar to poker, such as a full house or three-of-a-kind. The playfield consists of a small player character near the bottom, rows of dice that descend from the top, and a hold bin directly below the player's character. Pressing the B button will rotate the number on the player's dice and the A button will throw it upwards. Matching it with a die of the same number will eliminate them both and add that die to the first available slot in the hold bin. This will begin creating a hand, and completed hands can be activated by pressing down. Depending on the value or strength of the hand, this will eliminate single or multiple rows of blocks, award a large number of points, and keep the pressure off the player. In addition to a solitaire mode, there are also versus modes for human or CPU opponents. This creative take on puzzlers stands out, but the difficult to learn rules and even more difficult gameplay may turn away a number of players, although it may be rewarding to some.

Reflections: If Yahtzee was a puzzle game and required more skill than luck – this would be the result. The box art is terrifying and appears to show a melting man with a fetish for dice with bare feet. This is not even remotely an exaggeration. – IF



Panic Restaurant

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Oct. 1992
Developer: Disco, EIM
Publisher: Taito
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Rare
★★★★½

In this lively side-scrolling action game, players take control of the chef Cookie who must take back his restaurant by battling mutant food, such as walking fried eggs, sausages, and headless chickens. Cookie is armed with a frying pan, but can also upgrade to a few different weapons like a giant spoon, plates that can be thrown, or a fork that acts like a pogo-stick. The feel and look of the game is almost like an animated cartoon, with nice touches of personality instilled into the characters and enemies, which are all very well designed. Graphics are excellent, with a high degree of detail instilled in the levels and the character sprites. Bosses in particular are huge and look great. Levels are traversed both horizontally and vertically, and the restaurant and food-themed levels are a blast to play through, with traps/hazards like freezer ice and stove burners a nice touch. The gameplay flows very well with pinpoint controls, which is needed since some enemy spots act like projectile traps which are not easily avoided, for example when coming upon apples which explode. Fortunately, Cookie has a life bar which can be replenished with candy and the maximum increased via lollipops. Top-notch music adds to the tone of merriment, and a few mini-games for bonuses can be found inside the levels for a quick diversion. Packed with personality and an adequate challenge, players may be disappointed that this fun food ride ends perhaps a bit too soon.

Reflections: I'm not entirely sure how later NES games like *Panic Restaurant* were so well produced yet were almost never played when released. I know that many of these games had a bigger showing on the Famicom in Japan and were released in smaller numbers here due to the SNES taking hold, which makes it a shame that their brilliance was never fully appreciated at the time stateside. The concept of the game is very original and a nice shot in the arm to a genre that at many times is afraid to be a little more silly. Battling sunglasses-wearing chickens who pop out of a microwave is not something you can say exists in just about any other game. I cannot express just how well-designed the character sprites are. When Cookie ducks, not only does he cover his head in fear, but also changes his expression to one of wide-mouthed nervousness.

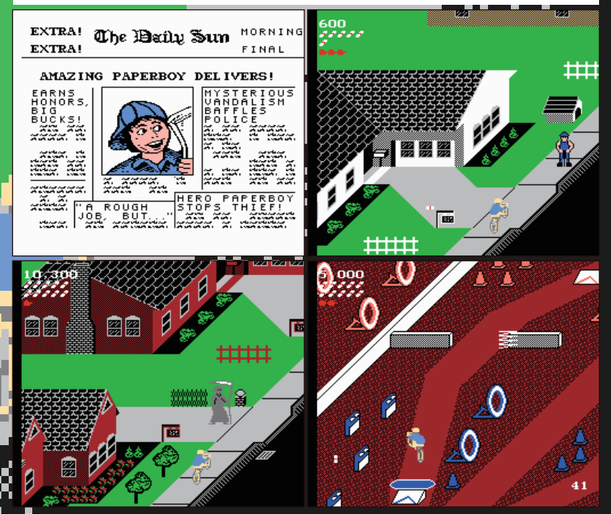
The enemy of the game was a rival chef strangely named Ohdove, which was a convoluted mistranslation of "hors d'oeuvres", which looking at it right now in print doesn't even seem like a real word, even though I think it is. – PC

Paperboy

Genre: Action
Release Date: Dec. 1988
Developer: Atari Games
Ported by: Tengen
Publisher: Mindscape
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★½

Delivering newspapers would seem like the worst video game concept ever, but it's not when done like this. As a paperboy, you wheel diagonally up a colorful isometric neighborhood where you have to throw newspapers to customers' doorsteps or mailboxes (earning more points). Subscriber houses are marked white or blue while nonsubscriber houses are colored red. If you fail to deliver a paper to a customer, they'll unsubscribe for the following day of the week. If you successfully deliver to all the customers on the block, you'll gain a new subscriber! It sounds mundane if not for the insane obstacles you will encounter, from radio-controlled cars and rolling tires, to angry old ladies, tornadoes, breakdancers, and death himself: The Grim Reaper. Some of these enemies can be countered by a well-timed paper toss. You can also rack up points by vandalizing the red nonsubscriber houses by destroying their windows and property with your papers (that'll show those jerks uninterested in the news). Newspapers are limited though, so picking up more in the neighborhood is needed. More fun can be had by running the obstacle course at the end of each street, where your adoring fans are waiting in the stands. The controls are adapted well from the arcade's handlebar controller, with players having to adapt to the constantly moving forward bike, and it maintains the unique twisted tone and quirky sense of humor of that version as well. The graphics and sound aren't the greatest, but overall it's a fun ride!

Reflections: Atari was on fire creatively in the mid '80s, putting out several arcade games that all featured not just unique concepts, but unique controls. *Paperboy*, *A.P.B.*, *Vindicators*, *720 Degrees*, *Rolling Thunder*, *Toobin'* – these are thoroughly well-executed arcade games that collectively stood out from the pack in a big way. I enjoyed the hell out of *Paperboy* both in the arcade and on the NES when I borrowed it from my grandparents' neighbor. I never was a paperboy as a kid, but maybe I would have been if it was as death-defying and exciting as the game experience here, or if there was a paperboy training course you could practice your jumps and paper-throwing skills on. Then again, the pay probably sucked, and who wants to get up early? – PC



Paperboy 2

Genre: Action
Release Date: Apr. 1992
Developer: Tengen
Publisher: Mindscape
Players: 1-2
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★½

Players take to the dangerous suburban streets again to deliver newspapers in this bizarre and difficult action game. Players select either a boy or girl character and then ride their bike down the street. The object again is to deliver newspapers to subscribers' houses (mailbox or doorstep), while avoiding the many zany and insane obstacles and characters along the street. Graphics and controls are improved over its predecessor, and the player has much more freedom to move around the much wider streets. Unlike the original, players can now throw newspapers to either side. This allows the player to move to and deliver newspapers to houses on both sides of the street, which happens in segments of several houses in a row before switching to the other side. Subscriber houses are marked with a mailbox, although the margin of error for tossing them on target is pretty slim. Like before, players can run out of papers, so picking up packs on the street is needed. The types of houses as well as the strange/humorous neighborhood characters are much more varied this time out, as are the funny targets the player can aim at, like knocking a person into a pool or dropping a car onto a person working underneath it. There are also a few targets that can get the paperboy on the front page of the newspaper, like stopping a runaway baby carriage and thwarting a thief. While the difficulty is ramped up a bit in the sequel, which requires a slower pace in order to be more careful, the improvements here (more elaborate streets, three weeks of stages instead of one, larger obstacle courses at the end of each block), make sure that this sequel isn't the same old news.

Reflections: While the more deliberate flow takes some getting used to, *Paperboy 2* manages to expand upon the original just enough to make a sequel to a very simple concept worth it. Now, if Atari decided to make a third game? Yeah, at that point it probably would have gone off the rails with the bicycle being armed with missiles and delivering newspapers in a nuclear wasteland while fighting off ninja alien invaders. Some of the houses in this game are truly strange, like the carnival house, ghost house, and my personal favorite, the large play fort that some kids somehow managed to get the zoning permission for. This is also one of the first games I can recall that gave the player the option of choosing either a male or female character, which was a nice decision since it was 1) probably easy to implement and 2) doesn't affect the game at all either way, so why not? There were papergirls out there delivering papers for minimum wage and tips, too! Tengen: the equal-opportunity NES developer! – PC

Peek-A-Boo Poker

Genre: Gambling
Release Date: 1991
Developer: Hacker International
Publisher: Panesian
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Very Rare
★

This adult five-card draw poker game has the player taking on one of three lovely lady opponents: Full House Francine, Double Dealing Debbie, or Pok-er Penny. It's strip poker, with the object being to win enough money to have your opponent disrobe. Players are staked with $500. Players can pass or bet between $30-$90 to start. The opponent can then raise the bet, call, or drop. Players can then discard any of their five cards to redraw and try to make a winning hand, such as two of a kind, two pairs, three of a kind, straight, flush, or full house. After drawing, another round of betting/raising/calling will begin until one player folds or the cards are eventually revealed, with the winning hand taking the pot. When the player reaches the $1,000, $2,000, $3,000, $4,000, and $5,000 levels, an image with your opponent will appear with them teasing you with poker-themed sexual innuendo, with more nudity revealed the more the player wins. It's a fairly shallow experience, with neither the poker gameplay being engaging, nor the erotica being worth the payoff. The opponents will often bluff too much, requiring the player to just consistently bet to be successful, and the fact that the player cannot see how many cards the opponent draws absolutely destroys any semblance of poker strategy that could exist, making the gameplay more of guesswork if you have a better hand than the opponent. The fact that the bets are limited to such small amounts also makes this a drawn-out experience, not nearly worth the 8-bit titillation that awaits very patient players.

Reflections: There are a ton of strip poker games that exist, going all the way back to computers in the '80s. As they advanced, the design switched over from pixel art to using images of real women to even videos of them. Some are extremely well done, with opponents that are not only beautiful but play with an artificial intelligence, complete with different betting and bluffing patterns that must be analyzed in order to succeed. What I'm trying to say, without saying that I've played a lot of strip poker games (I may have), is that this is one of the worst games in that adult genre that's ever been produced. Even if the gameplay was solid, the "payoff," as it is, is poor. On a more personal note (besides admitting that I have enjoyed strip poker video games in the past): I have never actually played a real-life game of strip poker, but have played a game of strip *Wii Play*. I'll leave those sordid details for my autobiography. – PC

Pesterminator: The Western Exterminator

Genre: Action
Release Date: 1990
Developer: Color Dreams
Publisher: Color Dreams
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Rare
★⋆

Whack pests with a giant mallet in this light-hearted Color Dreams production. Players control Kernel Kleanup (mascot for the Western Exterminator Company), a properly dressed exterminator who wears a tophat. The player on each level is tasked to wipe out a specific number of pests: insects, mice, spiders, etc., with a whack of the mallet. Levels consist of multiple rooms/areas which can be accessed via walking into doors and elevators to find more pests. Pressing SELECT will bring up the number of pests remaining for that stage. The gameplay is simple in theory but smacking some pests (especially flying ones) can be difficult due to the below average hit detection and the awkward platforming sections of some parts of levels. An annoyance is also finding those last few pesky critters, often requiring searching every nook and cranny of the stage. Subpar graphics, sounds, and music mar what otherwise is a pretty good concept on paper.

Reflections: I wonder how much money the Western Exterminator Company gave Color Dreams to sponsor this game. SURELY that investment must have paid off.

Another in a long line of Color Dreams productions that just fall short. I really like the main character, a polite-looking, hoity-toity exterminator who tries to hide a giant mallet behind his back. According to the story, this game takes place on the Moon(?!). I'm guessing that in this timeline, we've developed some sort of atmosphere-producing machines or at least are really good at building bio-domes, since some stages consist of nice houses with lush vegetation in the yards. I wonder what the public school system is like in a nice suburban Moon neighborhood? – PC

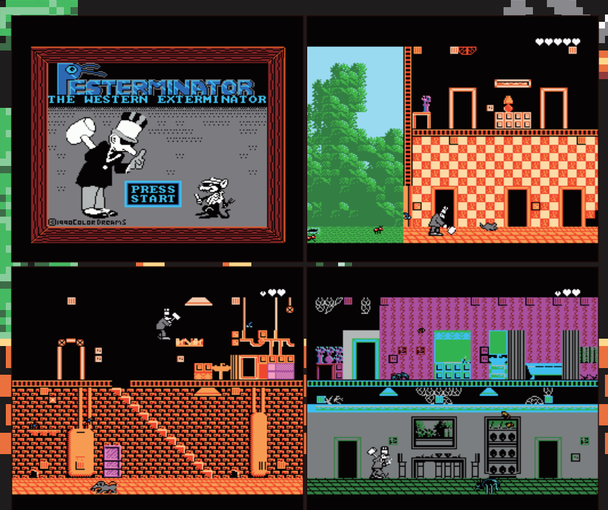
Peter Pan and the Pirates

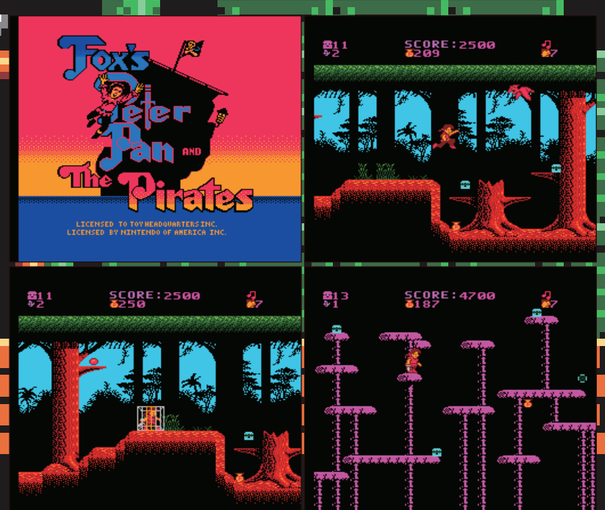
Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Jan. 1991
Developer: Equilibrium
Publisher: THQ
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★

This rough-playing but decent-looking side-scroller is based on the Fox cartoon adaptation of the classic Peter Pan tale. Players control Peter as they attempt to challenge Captain Hook on his ship. Each level has traps like falling cages, interactive elements like springboard mushrooms, and a certain number of pirate henchmen that must be destroyed before progressing. Peter's main form of attack is a very short sword that cannot be used while jumping, which makes combat difficult due to many enemies being on higher or lower platforms as players progress. Flying and vertically moving enemies like spiders and pterodactyls are particularly annoying because of this, as are pirates with guns whose bullets can home in on Peter. In addition to jumping, Peter can fly as long as he has enough fairy dust – bags of which can be obtained throughout the level. Other pick-ups include Tinkerbell and blue storage chests, both which can restore the player's numeric energy level. Bonus stages are sporadically accessible and present a single screen with many platforms where players can refill life and fairy dust quite easily. Stage environments include forests, caverns, and ice levels, but many of these are entirely, or almost entirely palette swaps of previous levels, so the game suffers from an extreme lack of variety. Music is pretty horrible stuff with repetitive melodies containing far too many high pitch notes that actually starts to hurt the ears after a while. It does look semi-decent though, with some of the shadowy backgrounds and character portraits during minor cutscenes being quite a cut above the gameplay they accompany.

Reflections: I dislike almost any game that requires you to collect/destroy a certain number of items/enemies before progressing. This often requires far too much backtracking and exacerbates poor level design. While this is certainly one of THQ's better efforts on the system, it's still a long ways off from a recommendation. – IF

The slight rejuvenation of the Peter Pan franchise in the early '90s (the cartoon series this game was based off of, as well as the movie *Hook*) was pretty short-lived. It seems that it was more or less a result of Baby Boomers feeling nostalgic and wanting to go back to re-experience the story they loved themselves when they were children. Their kids weren't really buying into it, though. – PC





Phantom Fighter

Genre: Action, Fighting
Release Date: Apr. 1990
Developer: Marionette
Publisher: FCI
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⋆

In this side-scrolling action game, the player travels through different villages taking down the Kyonshi (Chinese jumping vampires!) that inhabit the town's buildings. Players may walk around the villages (with an assistant in tow) and talk to villagers, and outside each house they can get a little message that will clue them in as to what is inside each, such as gems, sacred items, or the town's boss. The main goal is to rid the town of the vampire menace and move on to the next. You'll do this in one-on-one fights with martial arts moves that you can power up in exchange for scrolls located in some of the houses. Initial moves are limited to a basic punch and kick, but exchanging the scrolls with the kung fu master in each town will allow you to earn more maneuvers, such as high jumps, rapid punches, and crouch walking. A boss in each village is accessible after collecting three gems, and after defeating them it's time to help another group of terrified citizens. The game is repetitive by design, but the animation is very nice during the fight sequences, and there is a fairly wide selection of upgrades that add variety. The game has a simple but satisfying feel to it and has nice, straightforward action. While certainly not a lost classic, this clever and fun title is definitely worth some play time.

Reflections: This was one of the maybe 10 games I had never seen prior to Pat and me doing our first NES Marathon. We were getting tired when this came up and I remember exclaiming "Those things sure do hop around nicely!" And you know what? The Kyonshi still hop around nicely. I can say that clear headed! This isn't a particularly gorgeous game, but it moves in a very pleasant way. – IF

Pictionary

Genre: Board Game, Action
Release Date: July 1990
Developer: Software Creations
Publisher: LJN
Players: 1-4 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

Based upon the board game of drawing and guessing pictures, teams of one or two players can face off against another player team or the computer. Players start on a board and a die is rolled and the player's piece is advanced. When it stops, the team will engage in one of four timed mini-games of skill. They include a Space Invaders type of game, one where the player must save babies falling from a burning building with a trampoline, one where players have to carry boxes from left to right while avoiding green blobs, and one where you have to collect blue spheres. The more successful the player is, the more pieces of a picture on the right side will be uncovered. When the time runs out, the player's team has a minute to type in the correct answer of what the picture is via a text parser. If there are more than one player on each team, the game will also include games of free-drawing puzzles where one player on each team will have to guess what the other person draws, more similar to the real board game. While not totally unfun, the mini-games, which constitute the majority of the game, will get tedious quickly due to the small variety. It doesn't help that puzzles can contain lots of blank areas, so even competence at the mini-games does not guarantee enough of the picture will be uncovered to try to ascertain what it is. This title also contains a mode where the video game can be used in conjunction with the board game to draw in the game instead of using a pencil and pad. It's unknown if this is more of an oddity than a necessity, but it's here.

Reflections: For a year, drawing games encaptured society and transformed us all back to that special time in our past when we were ruining our living room walls with crayons. When that rush of nostalgia wore off, games like *Pictionary* (both board and video game versions) were left to sadly crawl back into the corner of the closet, much like those innocent feelings of youthful creativity were left to collect cobwebs in the far regions of our minds. When I stumble across a *Pictionary* board game every now and then at the flea market, I shed a tear, thinking of a time when frivolous and joyful expressions of simple creativity were allowed to blossom like buds on a vine.

...

Or I shed a tear because I was forced to play the same poor *Space Invaders* mini-game 26 times within 12 minutes. – PC

Pin-Bot

Genre: Pinball
Release Date: Apr. 1990
Developer: Rare
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-4
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⯪

Conversions of real pinball tables to the video game format are often tricky. True to life physics are difficult to code and most of the techniques required to play a table skillfully become impossible to perform. Despite those major issues, Rare converts *Pin-Bot* surprisingly well by recreating the table layout very faithfully and mostly avoiding gimmicky mini-games. Everything from the bagatelle in the upper right to the appropriate skill shot on the Vortex will help make players of the original feel right at home. Many shots feel surprisingly right compared to the original table, and it's still fun to nail the left ramp over and over. The basic rules remain the same: hit the colored targets and light the center grid to raise Pin-Bot's visor, obtain multiball, and travel the solar system. Locking a ball back into Pin-Bot's eye socket during multiball gives players a chance to fire the remaining ball up the solar ramp to collect a bonus. This also upgrades the level of the table itself, something only seen in the video game conversion. This adds in extra obstacles in the form of enemies which are unnecessary, but were obviously added for a more video game feel that doesn't detract from the fun too much. The odd split screen scrolling that keeps the bottom flippers visible at all times is distracting at first but helps eliminate unfair drains once it becomes familiar. This is definitely one of the better 8-bit table conversions.

Reflections: The physical pinball machine that this is based on is absolutely gorgeous with tons of bright, colorful light inserts and a great space theme that obviously couldn't be done total justice on the NES. Even modern video game recreations of the table can't capture the proper mood. It isn't my favorite playing table, but I always drop quarters in for a few games to experience the sound and light show. The real table was followed by *The Machine: Bride of Pin-Bot*, and *Jack-Bot*: a rethemed version of the original table with gambling elements. – IF

Pinball

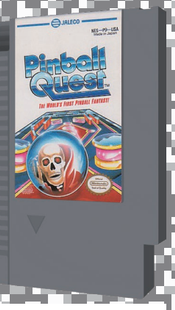
Genre: Pinball
Release Date: Oct. 1985
Developer: Nintendo R&D1
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★

This standard and simple pinball game features two separate but connected playfield screens. The playfields contain what you'd expect on a pinball machine: bumpers, lanes, targets, and of course, your flippers. The name of the game here is just getting a high score by hitting penguins, seals, and chicks. There is almost no subtlety in flipper strategy since the ball physics is so rudimentary, resulting in the ball reacting in a very limited fashion. The play is fairly unexciting. Particularly, the bottom field's bumpers are annoying as they are placed directly above the flippers, resulting in many flipper hits coming right back down and too often in between the flippers, resulting in losing the ball by draining in between them. It's a fairly mundane experience, not helped by the somewhat dull colors/graphics, the simple sounds, and lack of any game music. The only highlight may be the mini-game you can access by hitting a target on the bottom playfield. Here, the player enters a *Breakout*-style game to save a female (Pauline?) for bonus points by controlling Mario, who runs back and forth while holding a platform to deflect the bouncing pinball. There's very little else to speak of here. Fans of pinball should look to get their fix elsewhere.

Reflections: I know *Pinball* is a launch title, but come on. Those little plastic bagatelles I used to get in my bag of party favors as a kid were more complex. There's not even a multiball mode! There's only so many cute animal targets I can hit before I fall asleep while playing. – PC

Pinball Quest

Genre: Pinball
Release Date: June 1990
Developer: TOSE
Publisher: Jaleco
Players: 1-4
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

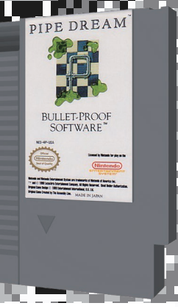


This pinball game contains three standard tables and one RPG mode. The RPG table is the main focus of the game and awesomely tasks the player with rescuing a princess pinball from hordes of evil monsters. The game plays as standard pinball but bumpers become trees or demonic symbols, skeletons shuffle about, and gravestones act as drop targets. Each screen has a basic goal to progress, such as breaking down a wooden door with the ball or revealing a path by defeating certain enemies. Upgrades can be purchased from shops in between certain screens that can add stoppers to the field, strengthen flippers, and power up the ball. The mode is rather short, at about six main screens in length, and culminates in a final boss fight with a generic demon. But despite the uninspired theme, this is still a very unique, quick, and fun experience. The standard tables don't fare so well. The best is the golf table which has a little golfer who shoots the ball up the lane as well as little gopher targets and a water hazard. Pop! Pop!, a table that mixes American flag patriotism with bowling and a jukebox, is bizarre and amusing-looking, but has odd pop bumper placement and lacks flow. Lastly there's Circus which has a cute little lion but an incredibly boring layout, with gameplay of constantly shooting the left lane to return to the top and repeating. While these all have some cute touches, they are mostly very simplistic. The problematic ball physics and odd angles of design are more glaring as well when not wrapped up in a cute little adventure package. It's a very odd bird of a title worth checking out for pinball fans, but others might not find as much here to enjoy.

Reflections: What a fantastic idea for a game! I'd love to see this revisited with a longer RPG mode. I always feel bad for the little hero pinball when he gets roughed up by the orcs at the beginning. The standard tables in any Japanese developed pinball game are always an interesting study for me because physical pinball machines were never widespread in Japan. The layouts are often fairly inventive, sometimes working well and other times not at all. – IF

Pipe Dream

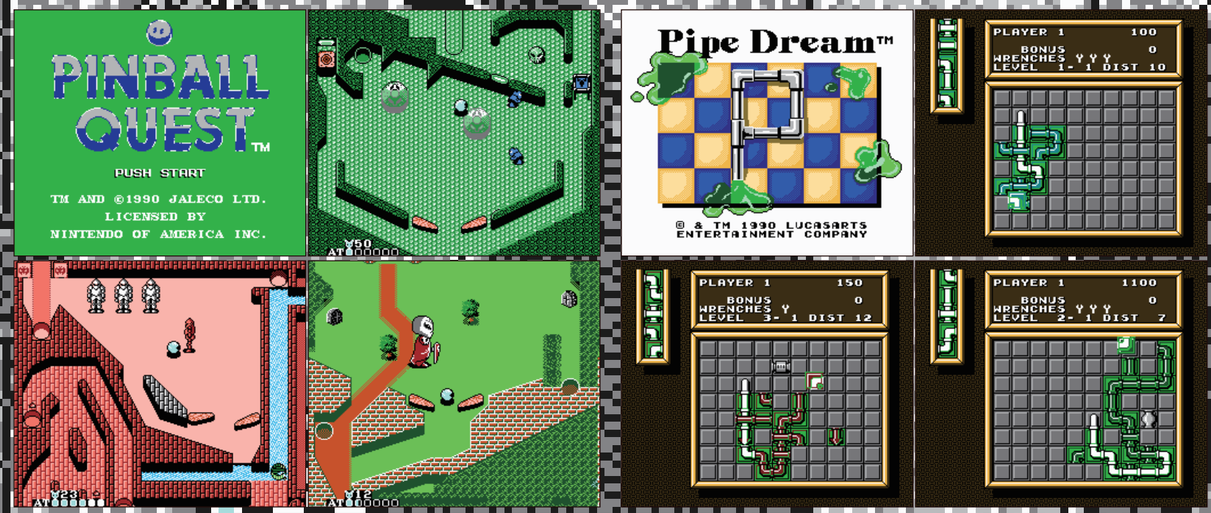
Genre: Puzzle
Release Date: Sept. 1990
Developer: The Assembly Line
Ported by: Distinctive Software
Publisher: Bullet-Proof Software
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★⯪



This fast-paced puzzle game gives players a short amount of time to lay pipe tiles from a spigot to an exit before the "flooz" starts flowing. Once the gunk starts moving through the pipes, players can continue to place pipe tiles on the grid as long as the slime never spills. The pieces can't be rotated (they are fixed in position), and this is a large part of the challenge. To aid players in their plumbing panic is the ability to see these pieces quite a bit in advance through a window next to the grid with the upcoming tiles. Tension mounts quickly as players must keep an eye on the location of the slime in the pipework while thinking many moves ahead in an effort to tie it all together. Bonuses are awarded for tricky objectives like making use of every space on the grid or passing flooz through cross pieces a certain number of times. Bonus rounds pepper the normal stages and require a player to think ahead and build the pipes from the bottom row up instead of allowing free placement. The game is definitely a change of pace from standard falling block puzzle fare, but it can be quite tense and unforgiving, which is perhaps a negative to some players.

Reflections: I had this game for MS-DOS when I was a kid and while I loved the idea it may very well be the source of my Generalized Anxiety Disorder. – IF

I never quite enjoyed this one. It came off too much like *Plumber Training Adventures*. – PC



Pirates!

Genre: Action, Strategy
Release Date: Oct. 1991
Developer: MicroProse Software
Ported by: Rare
Publisher: Ultra Games
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★★

Sail the high seas of the Caribbean in Sid Meier's ground-breaking, open world game. Players choose one of four national allegiances, the time period to start (which affects who holds the power in the region), the difficulty, and one of several special skills (fencing, gunnery, navigation, wit/charm, medicine) to help them during their campaign. Players start in a town and have to recruit a crew for their starting ship, and then choose where to sail and how to play at their leisure. Buying and trading goods, attacking and looting merchant ships, hunting pirate ships, visiting cities, and attacking cities and forts constitute the main gameplay elements. Different gameplay modes all appear and are controlled differently, from the overhead sailing, which depends upon using the shifting wind to gain speed, land combat, and the well-done one-on-one fencing combat. This one-on-one fighting mode occurs when boarding a ship, usually after a cannon battle, and has the player sword duel with that ship's captain for control. If the player wins, they'll gain loot and gold. The world is vast with tons to explore and is ever-changing dependent upon the starting year the player chooses as well as random events that can occur. If traveling with the ship's crew on land, forts can be entered/invaded. Towns can be entered by sailing in and docking to try and recruit sailors at the tavern, trade goods, buy/repair ships, and talk to the governor for missions or information (they can even introduce their daughter to the player!). Towns can also be attacked for plunder and/or control. Players can choose to engage the world as they wish, can act within the law or as a pirate, can avoid or seek out conflict, and can also conduct side quests such as searching out clues in towns by speaking to people, which can result in tracking down hidden treasure or finding a kidnapped family member. This title represents a gaming milestone, due to its remarkable open-ended nature and incredible replay value, while capturing the feeling of excitement of adventure on the high seas.

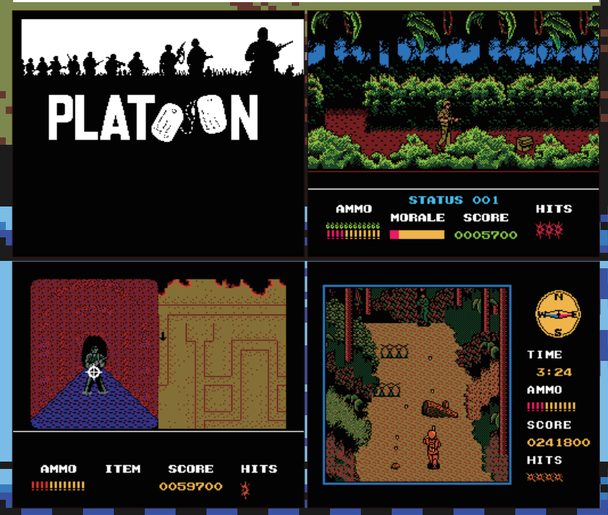
Reflections: In the modern era, open world games are fairly common, but in the mid to late '80s you had very few good ones that existed, namely *Elite* and *Pirates!* What's so incredible about this game, besides the fact that you can truly play as you desire, is its great depth. I've played through the game several times, but even still do not truly understand the subtleties of how political events affect the gameplay elements, towns, etc. Just writing this review made me want to go and revisit this fantastic game again, but then I would have risked never finishing this book. – PC

Platoon

Genre: Action, Shooter
Release Date: Dec. 1988
Developer: Ocean Software
Ported by: Sunsoft
Publisher: Sunsoft
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

Players must survive the Viet Cong in this title loosely based upon the Vietnam war film. Gameplay is divided into four different stages/modes. The first is a side-scrolling level where the player must navigate a jungle labyrinth by vertically traveling between different layers to find the explosives to detonate. Using a rifle and grenades, players must fend off enemy soldiers who will pop up out of nowhere on the sides of the screen or even jump out of trees to attack. Players get four hit points per the five provided lives, but triggering a trip-wire is instant death. After finding the explosives, the player must make their way past the bridge to destroy it, and then navigate a small village to find the entrance to the second stage: the tunnel. This is a first-person-shooter maze where players must navigate (using a map) and take out soldiers who will fire at the player or pounce from underwater with a knife. If the players can find the flares and compass in supply rooms and then find the ladder exit, they can move on. This short third stage is a stationary first-person shooter which takes place in a bunker. Here, players must shoot the enemy soldiers as they appear out of brush. The diffiult final stage is a series of single-screen overhead shooter stages where the player has to move to the top of the screen while avoiding traps and enemy fire (they must be completed within a four minute time limit). While visually interesting and providing four unique gameplay experiences, none are executed well in the least. The first stage is too obtuse, with similar backgrounds blending together and far too many enemies that attack every two seconds. The second stage doesn't provide enough ammo to deal with the enemies, the third is fine but too short, and the fourth is extremely unbalanced. If you're looking for an NES game with an unnerving tone, this would be it, but its lack of quality is what shocks the most.

Reflections: Listen. I'm not opposed to violent or "dark" NES games. Heck, *Golgo 13: Top Secret Episode* is one of my personal favorites, and I owned that as a kid. However, basing an NES game around an anti-war film with gruesome violence is wildly inappropriate. The message of the Academy Award-winning film decrying the Vietnam War and showing the dichotomy of man under those dark circumstances is why it's regarded as a classic... not cool action scenes. So what do you end up getting on the NES? A stage where you nonchalantly shoot dozens of VC soldiers while you can jump as high as Mario, and one that comes off as a poor man's *Commando* – a strange attempt to properly adapt the dense/mature material it's based on. – PC



Popeye

Genre: Platformer
Release Date: June 1986
Developer: Nintendo R&D1
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★

The classic cartoon hero sailor must save the damsel Olive Oyl in this arcade port. Three single-screen platform levels greet the player with various stairs, ledges, and ladders Popeye navigates in each while trying to avoid the enemy vultures, Sea Witch, and nemesis Brutus (not Bluto). The goal of the three levels is similar: collect a certain number of hearts, musical notes, or letters that spell "help me" that Olive Oyl drops in each level. If the floating items hit the ground before Popeye can collect them, the player will have a limited amount of time to reach them before losing a life. Popeye's punch is useless on Brutus, but can be used to destroy the vultures and bottles thrown his way. Brutus can only be dispatched if Popeye punches a can of spinach on the side of the stage to power up for a limited time and then chase and touch Brutus, which will take him out of action for a limited time. On the first level, Popeye can also time a punch on punching bag to hit a bucket to fall on Brutus' head. It's not a particularly deep game, but as an early arcade experience, it's fun with a good challenge, as the player has to constantly move around the cramped levels and watch out for danger while collecting items. It's a great use of the license, with nice graphics representing all the show's characters, along with that famous theme song that we all know and love.

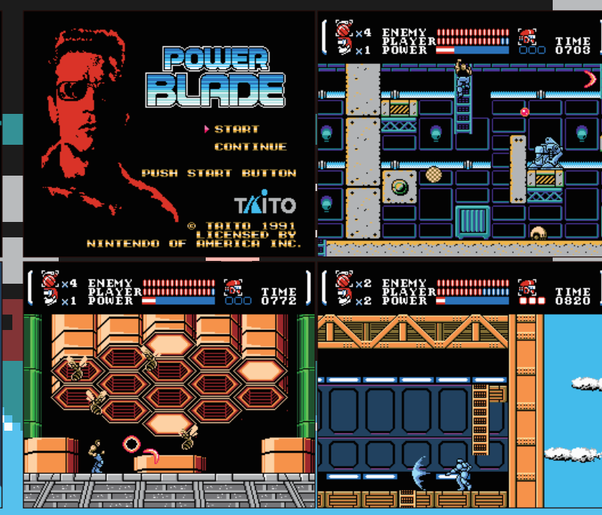
Reflections: *Popeye* is one of my favorite classic arcade games. Cumberland Farms, an East Coast convenience store chain (are they still around?), had one of them in a store near me. I used to just stare at it while my Dad would buy milk and bread, especially since he never gave me a quarter to play. It's an absolutely gorgeous arcade cabinet with great artwork and a sky blue color scheme that's really sharp. It's a simple game, sure, but the action never lets up trying to constantly avoid Brutus, who will not let up trying to run you down (he's a smart lil' bastard... okay he's not little, but still). And yes, it's not Bluto (the original Popeye villain) in the game, but Brutus, a clone who looked very similar and was used for a time instead of Bluto due to some legal garbage I don't feel like getting into. Don't try to correct me! – PC

Power Blade

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Mar. 1991
Developer: Natsume
Publisher: Taito
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★

It's up to agent NOVA to restore a supercomputer that's been taken offline by gathering six data tapes in this action-platformer. The player can select and play through the six levels in any order they wish via a menu screen. When the action begins, the player is armed with a boomerang weapon which can be charged via a meter to throw it farther. In the nonlinear horizontal and vertical levels, players must find a friendly agent to unlock the entrance to the end of the level while fending off many enemies, most of them mechanical gun emplacements and humanoid/animalistic robots of various strength. Pick-ups scattered throughout the levels include strengthening the boomerang, increasing the number that can be thrown (up to three), increasing the maximum throwing distance, burgers to replenish health, grenades that can damage all enemies on screen, and storable energy tanks that can be used to replenish the entire health bar. The most impressive one is the Power Suit, which protects the player from three hits while enabling them to wield more powerful energy blasts. The game moves along at a brisk pace, as the fine controls (such as attacking in all eight directions) allow the player to move through levels at their own pace taking out enemies, all while accompanied by some very good tunes. The fun levels themselves all are different in look and layout and enemy design is pretty nice, as it gets switched up somewhat to match the level environments. Enemy boss battles are balanced and satisfying, if a bit too simple depending on your current assortment of items. Throwing boomerangs has never been this fun, at least in 8-bit form.

Reflections: NOVA, as he appears in the game, looks like Duke Nukem early on in his career. NOVA isn't nearly as jacked as Duke, but the trademark short buzzed blond hair, sunglasses, and tank top are all there. Or as reports have offered, NOVA could have just been based on Arnold Schwarzenegger (who Duke Nukem was sort of based on in looks, too). *Power Blade* is to me what others see *Mega Man* as, I suppose. There are some fun power-ups, lots of platforming and ladder-climbing, and the degree of polish on the game is impeccable. But unlike *Mega Man*, there are not really many moments of cheap trial-and-error death and discovery that I cannot stand. Huzzuh, Natsume! Hopefully you don't blow a good thing in the sequel! – PC

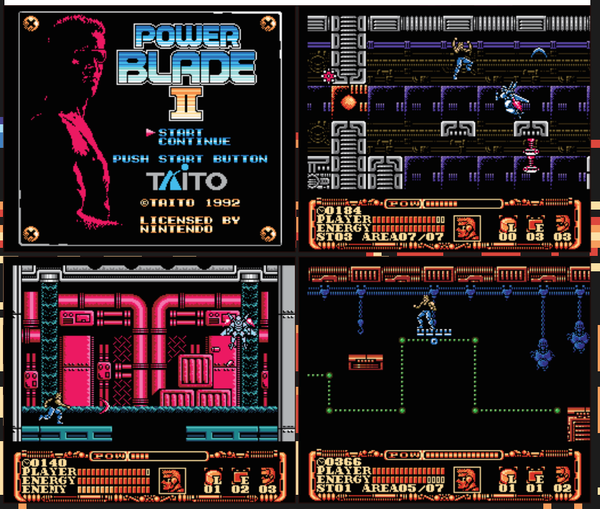


Power Blade 2

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Oct. 1992
Developer: Natsume
Publisher: Taito
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Rare
★★★⯪

This action-platformer sequel has NOVA tasked to take down an evil corporation and its cyborg army. Four levels are selectable from the start with the fifth and final being unlockable. Gameplay primarily consists of attacking enemies with boomerangs (throwable in eight directions with a chargeable meter) as well as a power slide to maneuver around. The linear levels consist of several areas each with robotic enemies to take down (mostly humanoids and turrets). The middle of each level consists of a boss battle against a dragon robot, which if defeated will give the player one of four selectable power suits that the player can use and switch between at will. These consist of a suit to grab and climb on walls and ceilings, one for swimming underwater, a flying suit, and one with defensive rotating orbs. All four suits have a much more powerful wave attack than the normal boomerang. Using the suits depletes an energy meter, but packs are available fairly often for keeping the meter filled. Besides other pick-ups, such as health packs and increasing the strength and length of attacks, energy packs are key to overcoming the game's environmental hazards. Areas with moving platforms, rising/falling ceilings, snaking platforms, propeller traps, etc., are plentiful. These not only slow the action down to a snail's pace in places, but rely on experimentation, using slides to avoid getting crushed, or on using suits to more easily get past areas with ease. This game imbalance is troubling, as playing in normal mode is overly difficult in many areas, but using the power suits makes a large chunk of the game a breeze, especially the boss fights where spamming attacks can get you through. Visually, the game looks nice. However, most parts of the stages look too similar to one another, and the enemies aren't really unique to each area. While still a fun game, the change in gameplay and level design is a stark drop off from the first, with the power suits being both a blessing and a curse for the overall experience.

Reflections: The story is an improvement over the first – a scary military-industrial complex tale of weapons manufacturers having as much power as governments. Basically, NOVA has to wipe out this Delta Foundation to prevent them from selling their robot soldiers to another nation. It's good and adult-themed stuff, and a unique story not really seen in the rest of the library. What is not an improvement is the change in direction here by Natsume. It appears subtle on the surface, but is more defined the more you get into the game. The fun, "play at your leisure pace" of the original was jettisoned entirely for a "you'll play the game the way WE say so" approach. I'm surprised by just how much less fun I have playing the sequel, even with four "cool" superhero power suits available. – PC



Power Punch II

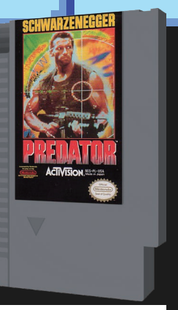
Genre: Sports, Fighting
Release Date: June 1992
Developer: Beam Software
Publisher: American Softworks
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★⯪

Players take control of Mark Tyler, a boxing champion who voyages to the stars to take on alien challengers for the galactic championship. After a training session where the players must hit focus pads to build endurance, strength, and agility, the action begins. The matches take place on a horizontal plane facing the opponent. Players have the ability to move left to right, while opponents can move left/right and also move forward and back. Left and right body blows, jabs, and uppercuts are at the player's disposal, as well as a block by pressing down. Matches consist of moving away from punches, blocking, and then timing punches when opponents are in range, and before they can attack. The majority of the one minute rounds barely rise above button-mashing, although there is some strategy involved in sticking and moving. Many, many punches have to be landed to do much damage, since by default Mark is fairly weak. The exception is the "power punch," of which up to four can be earned and thrown per round. These are gained versus each opponent by different circumstances, for example punching one opponent four times quickly in a row and punching another in the body after they swing and miss with a hook. Figuring out how to earn power punches and how to efficiently deal damage is the crux of the experience, although throwing the power punches is done in an undocumented and strange way via the Select button. Even with the use of stronger punches, the slugfests can be monotonous drags. On a positive note, the presentation is solid, with some solid graphics for the character sprites, inventive designs for the alien boxers, and the alien snake-like ring card girl who slithers around in between rounds. Still, the entire experience feels somewhat unrefined and in need of a few more sparring sessions to get into ring shape.

Reflections: Originally conceived as a sequel to *Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!!*, *Mike Tyson's Intergalactic Power Punch* was scrapped once Mr. Tyson's legal troubles came to light. Even if that didn't happen, I highly, highly doubt that Nintendo would have signed off on a very mediocre follow-up to their smash hit in the first place. Some very minor sprite alterations and a title change later, and you have just another minor, forgettable title in the NES library. For some strange reason the "II" in *Power Punch II* was kept in place, just to try and unconvincingly trick people into thinking it was another *Punch-Out!!* The original ROM is available out there on the web and via illegal repro carts, just in case you want to play the game as originally intended – as a convicted rapist boxer in space. – PC

Predator

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Apr. 1989
Developer: Klon
Publisher: Activision
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★⯪



Based very loosely on the 1987 action film *Predator*, players take control of Dutch as they battle scorpions, soldiers, and cartoon creatures. Each level of platforming contains at least one door at the end that the player must find and enter to advance. Players are armed at first with only a punch but can find and upgrade to grenades, a machine gun, and a laser gun. The issue is that only the machine gun and laser gun are sufficient in dealing with enemies, and the laser gun is the only weapon powerful enough to not make the game a drag. The larger issue is that at the end of each level, players start again with only their punch, making a lot of the challenge an unnecessary adventure to find a better weapon. Platforming is precarious and the character can fall through parts of the levels that appear to be walls but actually are not. There are no bosses, save for facing the Predator himself before the door to exit levels. Every few levels the game switches to "Big Mode" where Dutch is half the size of the screen and the game becomes an awkward scrolling shooter where the player must destroy floating inanimate objects before facing the Predator. There are some decent ideas here but the game comes off very half-baked, and it appears at times as if these were two entirely unrelated games that the film license was slapped on to and cobbled together.

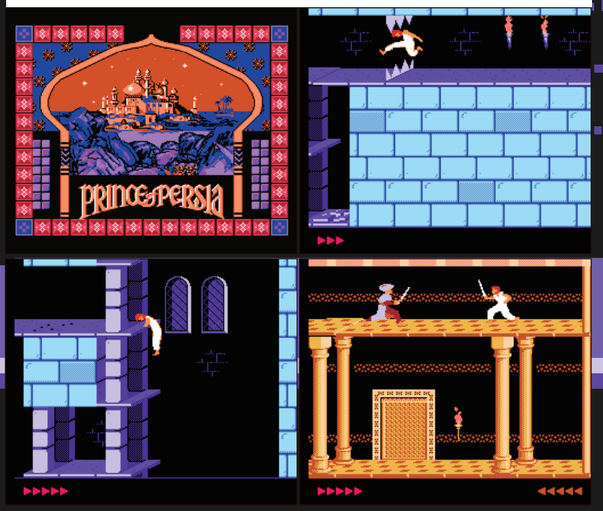
Reflections: Let's be clear: *Predator* is one of my favorite action films, and it's one of Arnold Schwarzenegger's finest roles. The NES game was never on my radar as a child, and that's a good thing since I would have been extremely disappointed. I'm not sure why this game was even given an NES release anyway, as it falls within that same "totally inappropriate for children" vein as *Platoon* and *Total Recall*. There is actually a cutaway image from the movie a few levels into the game that shows Dutch along with the hanging bodies of the soldiers that were skinned alive. It's a graphically horrific image that only got past the Nintendo of America censors because they seemingly got bored and shut the game off before getting to that point in the game to see it. – PC

Prince of Persia

Genre: Platformer, Puzzle
Release Date: Nov. 1992
Developer: Brøderbund Software
Ported by: MotiveTime
Publisher: Virgin Games
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

As the prince, players have one hour to escape the dungeons and stop the evil Jaffar from controlling the kingdom and murdering its princess. This title's claim to fame is its smooth motion-captured (via rotoscoping) character animations. The realism isn't just superficial; the gameplay is lifelike, demanding a different platforming paradigm. The controls feel stiff and delayed, but deliberate. You're a "real" human here, so you climb slowly, run and jump with realistic momentum, and die from falls. The dungeon is made of stone platforms with tiles, like sidewalks, and you can grab ledges. Some tiles hide switches, deadly spikes, and pits. You'll die often trying to avoid such traps, even if you see them. To pass a slicing blade trap, just jump through it, but the controls make it constitutionally challenging. Careful planning of movements is needed, despite the hourglass constantly losing grains. An example scenario: you must activate a timed door, clear a gap, avoid a tile that shuts the door, and reach the door before it shuts. To make the specific sequence of moves perfectly required, players will have to die to learn it. There are 12 levels, and the puzzle is finding the exits and their switches without closing or blocking them with incorrect switches. The dungeon's a maze, and getting lost wastes precious time. This game's extremely difficult and sometimes unfair. There are potions that recover health and poisons that harm you, but the only way to differentiate them is trial and error. Occasionally you swordfight guards by blocking and stabbing, but it always feels like chance. Fortunately there's a password system, but it will not grant you extra time. Most won't escape this dungeon, but if you love legendarily difficult games with unique platforming controls, do try.

Reflections: In the early 1990s, the northeastern American grocery store chain Wegmans started selling off its rental NES games. My older brother took me there and said that for my birthday he would buy me any one that I wanted. I remember choosing *Prince of Persia*. I told my brother that I had heard of it before and that people were saying it was a good game. But how did I know that? I had probably seen it in a gaming magazine. The brief moment when I picked the game out is burned into my brain in detail, probably because I was reviewing it in my head for years afterwards. Had I made a mistake? Had I chosen a bad game? Although I questioned myself, I never concluded that *Prince of Persia* was a "bad" game simply because it was hard, and I still don't think it is. The way it handles, you can tell that the game was intended to be cruel deliberately, not by accident. In the manual it even says, "Don't be afraid to explore and to experiment. After all, you've got nothing to lose except your life, the Princess, and the entire kingdom." Gee, thanks for the encouragement. – KN



Princess Tomato in the Salad Kingdom

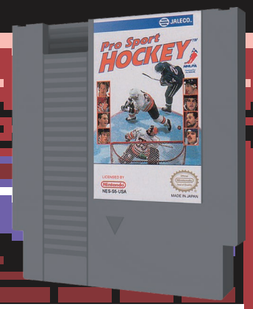
Genre: Adventure
Release Date: Feb. 1991
Developer: Hudson Soft
Publisher: Hudson Soft
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★★½

Players are tasked with saving this adventure game's titular princess from evil Minister Pumpkin. You, Sir Cucumber, are presented with an image of your current location in first-person perspective and text commands such as MOVE, TAKE, TALK, HIT, etc., allow you to travel, find items, and converse with the quirky anthropomorphic citizens of the Salad Kingdom. There is both a LOOK command for an overview of the scene and a CHECK command which provides more information on specific items/places/characters. The PERCY command, which calls upon your puckish persimmon compatriot, is especially versatile, as Percy provides commentary and clues, and is sometimes the only way to trigger new dialog and paths. At times it can be difficult to decipher how to advance the game, which forces a "try everything on everything" tactic, but this is rarely tedious, because scrolling through commands and text is simple and speedy, and also because the game is rife with cheeky humor no matter what you do. Additional gameplay elements include a few mazes, made oppressive by graphical limitations, and "Finger Wars," which are appropriately silly but slightly annoying games of Rock-Paper-Scissors with enemy characters. The game is split into nine levels, and completing one presents you with a relatively easy-to-enter password. Due to its wacky humor, colorful characters, and fun story, this game is a real peach.

Reflections: This really is a fun and funny game – I found myself chuckling and grinning during my entire time playing. But even a light and fluffy title such as this gives rise to some burning questions. For instance, if Saladorian shops sell grape juice and peanut butter and avocado sandwiches, does that mean the inhabitants of the Salad Kingdom are okay with cannibalism? Or is it considered vegan? Why is the princess named Tomato, her brother named Lettuce, and her sister named Lisa, and how is one a fruit, one a vegetable, and one a *human*? And lastly, just how salacious is it to happen upon a lady orange showering? I mean, her peel was on *the whole time*. – AP

Pro Sport Hockey

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Nov. 1993
Developer: TOSE
Publisher: Jaleco
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★



This vertically scrolling ice hockey title features 24 teams with 12 real NHL players on each, including individual player skill attributes. Game options include training, exhibition, and a playoff mode via password save. Gameplay moves at a brisk pace, as players skate along with the prospect of scoring and preventing goals. On offense, players can shoot and aim slap shots, but passing is too slow and proves to be mostly ineffective. On defense, players can try and stop their opponents via a poke check (which is mostly useless), and a body check which will result in penalties far too often, disrupting the flow of play. Scoring, unfortunately seems to be more random than based on skill or player stats involved, and ridiculously high scoring games are possible. And that's the glaring problem here: the game does not seem to simulate a real hockey experience closely enough. Some nice options include the ability to manually control the goalie, having either overtime or penalty shots in the event of a tie, turning penalties on/off, and the ability to swap out players during the game who may have lost their strength. There's a promising game hidden here, but the limits of the programming and/or the NES prevent something truly special from emerging.

Reflections: *Pro Sport Hockey* looks to be patterned after Electronic Arts' highly successful *NHL* hockey game series, which at this point had released its third game: *NHL '94*. Unfortunately, this isn't nearly as refined as the *NHL* series in any way and comes across as a hollow knockoff in comparison.

There seems to be a weird bug that occurs when trying to change players and viewing the stats of replacement players, where it prevents you from leaving the menu screen... or maybe I just had trouble understanding how to do it properly. I probably shouldn't freely admit to that in an NES guide book, but hey, it's out there now! – PC

Pro Wrestling

Genre: Wrestling
Release Date: Mar. 1987
Developer: TRY
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

Most of the original Nintendo published sports games were simple samples to set the stage for later titles. *Pro Wrestling* was different and set a high bar from the beginning. The player chooses from one of six colorful wrestling personalities, such as Starman, the Amazon, and Kin Korn Karn. They all have different looks and a somewhat similar wrestling move set along with one or two special moves that are unique to each character. The controls are very intuitive for a game of this nature, which has several types of attacks. The wrestlers can strike with B and A (punch and jump kick) and perform grappling moves when they "lock up" (wrestlers connect) via a button combination. This includes moves like suplexes, body slams, piledrivers, running moves (clothesline, flying knee), and even diving moves from the turnbuckle or from the ring apron over the top rope to outside the ring. The level of detail in this game is off the charts for the time, featuring a colorful and responsive crowd, ring announcers, a referee who moves around, and even a cameraman outside the ring. There is only one game mode, where your selected wrestler must battle through the other wrestlers twice in a row before taking on the Great Puma for the championship. However, the gameplay is so well-thought-out that it allows players to simulate a pro wrestling match fairly closely, making for a very enjoyable experience. The two-player mode is also a blast!

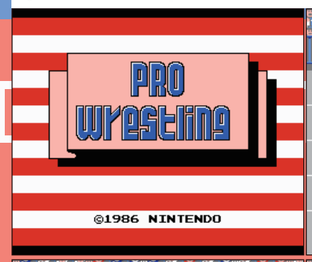
Reflections: *Pro Wrestling* is not just one of the best wrestling games of the 8-bit generation, but it established the control scheme for most wrestling games and influenced almost every wrestling game that followed, including the venerable *Fire Pro Wrestling* series in Japan. It's no surprise then that the lead developer of that heralded franchise, Masato Masuda, also was the lead on *Pro Wrestling*. It is strange that I never had this game as a kid, but being that almost every other kid I knew had it, I ended up playing it quite a bit via friends' houses and borrowing it. Each of the wrestlers is at least based somewhat off of a real-life wrestler in Japan. I usually preferred using either Starman due to his acrobatics or Great Panther because I liked the head butt and iron claw. However, you could always take the easy way out and choose the powerful King Slender *cough Ian*. The amount of detail the developers put into the game really reflects how much pro wrestling is loved in Japan, where it is a national sport. Here in the US, if you mention you follow pro wrestling, you'll get either an eye roll or a "that's nice" response like you were a three-year-old who just recited the alphabet. – PC

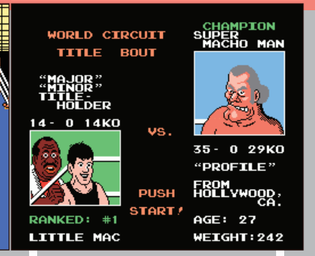
Punch-Out!!

Genre: Sports, Fighting
Release Date: Aug. 1990
Developer: Nintendo R&D3
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★★

Little Mac must take on colorful opponents in the ring on the way to dethrone champion Mr. Dream in this re-release of *Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!!* Gameplay in the ring takes place in a single spot from behind Little Mac. He is smaller than his opponents, allowing the player to see both boxers clearly. Little Mac can punch to the body with his left hand using B and right using A. Combining with UP will throw a punch to the face. Little Mac can dodge quickly left or right, as well as block or duck opponents' punches. Players can attempt to throw punches and land them whenever they want, or more effectively, can wait until opponents throw a punch. If players dodge one, opponents will usually be stunned, allowing the player to land one to several punches in a row. This creates the crux of the gameplay experience, as the game is more about learning patterns and pure reflexes versus being a boxing simulation. At certain moments, players can land a single punch when opponents flash or blink, and if punched in that instant, players will earn a star (up to three). By then pressing START, players will throw a slower but more powerful uppercut punch. If players have their punches blocked or are punched themselves, they will not only lose energy but also lose hearts. If hearts are depleted, Little Mac will grow tired (and turn pink) and will not be able to throw a punch again until dodging punches successfully. Each match is three rounds, and the match ends in one of three ways: KO (boxer cannot make the 10 count after being knocked down), TKO (boxer is knocked down three times in one round), or a decision after three rounds are complete (some opponents cannot be defeated this way). The gameplay is fast and fluid, as the boxing happens in quick spurts, with the player having to be ever alert to punch, dodge, and counter-punch to succeed. The array of interesting opponents includes Don Flamenco, King Hippo, Piston Honda, Soda Popinski, and more, each with unique patterns and attacks in the ring that must be learned. If players can defeat all challengers they will then face Mr. Dream for the title. Shining with personality and polish, the entire presentation is top-notch, with quality graphics and large sprites, nice sound effects, and quality music.

Reflections: The reason for this re-release was because Nintendo's license for Mike Tyson's name/likeness ended, not because he lost the title to Buster Douglas in Feb. 1990, nor due to his rape arrest (1991). I would like to to point out that Little Mac is only 17 years old in this game. A high school junior probably shouldn't be slugging it out with pro boxers, but it wouldn't be the first time NES games put underage characters in harm's way. Half the library features child protagonists fighting for their lives against gun-toting thugs and dangerous critters. I hear that Nemo still is seeing a psychiatrist today. – PC





The Punisher

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Nov. 1990
Developer: Beam Software
Publisher: LJN
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

The player takes control of the Marvel Comics vigilante in this third-person shooter on rails. Stages are somewhat selectable in any order, with each featuring a supervillain from the comics. Action progresses left-to-right as the player can move and shoot his weapons to take out criminals and thugs on the street via a crosshairs target. Pressing left or right on the D-pad will move both the Punisher and the crosshairs, but if holding down A to fire, the D-pad will just move the crosshairs while the Punisher stands still. Players start with an automatic but slower firing machine pistol as well as grenades, both limited. Many items/power-ups are available throughout the levels by shooting the background objects and revealing the icons, which can then be shot to be picked up. These include upgraded weapons (machine guns with higher firing rates, rocket launcher), additional ammo, more health, extending the health bar, and extra lives. The control for the shooting is standard and moves fine. However, moving the Punisher to avoid attacks can be a little slow since the crosshairs move a lot quicker than your character does. Gameplay is a little monotonous as there are a limited number of different enemies, and the difficulty swings from extremely easy to difficult depending on the level. Some enemy bosses, in particular, will dish out a lot of damage to the player unless they have upgraded weapons, although it is nice that it switches to hand-to-hand combat with punching and kicking when enemy bosses approach the Punisher in the foreground. Graphics are not as sharp as they should be, and there is almost no in-game music, which makes for an eerie but dull atmosphere. There's some good action, but it can get tiresome.

Reflections: Wow, this is violent for an NES game. Besides mowing down enemies, before each level the titular character psychotically states how he will "clean up the streets" by killing everyone. The lack of music makes the game also seem darker and more soulless. There is ONE bit of humor in the game, albeit a strange one. On each level, a random saxophone diddy will play and then you'll see a random person sitting on the ground playing it. If he is left alone, he'll finish the song, but if you kill him he'll slouch over and the song will slow to a depressing, deadly end. Twisted as hell, but fun! – PC

Puss 'n Boots: Pero's Great Adventure

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: June 1990
Developer: Shouei System
Publisher: Electro Brain
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

Players take control of Pero the Cat, Toei Animation's mascot, in this platforming adventure loosely based on *Around the World in 80 Days*. Players control the traveling cat through simple levels defeating cats dressed as cowboys, British Queen's Guards, and other costumes that match the level's theme. The stages themselves are well varied, taking our intrepid feline from the Wild West to the reaches of outer space and back down into modern New York City. The graphics are simple and crude and the sound effects match, but the visuals at least have a nice variety of color. Despite the simplistic nature of the audio and visuals, everything works and feels just fine. The control takes a bit of time to get used to, as Pero's jumps feel unpredictable and speedy. Pero has three attacks: a gun that shoots forward, a bomb with a quickly dropping arc, and an upwards-firing boomerang. Switching between the weapons can be a bit tedious, but there is some strategy here that helps stretch every bit out of the life meter. The most fun part of the game, however, comes in the form of various vehicles that Pero rides in certain levels, ranging from biplanes and hot air balloons to submarines and cars. These segments resemble simple scrolling shooters and obstacle courses, which while quite basic on their own, lend a deal of variety to the game. It's this simple gameplay medley, mixed with the theme of a cat on a journey, that helps make what could have been an entirely unremarkable game something that is at least worth playing, despite some shortcomings.

Reflections: I picked this up as a flea market find and quickly shelved it after a few very unfortunate attempts at wringing any enjoyment from it. I can't remember what led to me putting it back in the NES months later, but I ended up playing it for a couple hours and completing the game. It certainly won't attract everyone, but I can't help but love Pero's adventuring gear and all of the different (yet very similar) vehicles he gets to play around in. – IF

Puzzle

Genre: Puzzle
Release Date: 1990
Developer: Idea-Tek
Publisher: American Video Entertainment
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★

This title consists of a series of slide puzzles. On a rectangular board, puzzle pieces of an image are divided into squares and mixed up, and they then have to be slid around the board with the assistance of one or more free-space squares to help rearrange and maneuver them around the rectangular space. If the puzzle is put together, players move on to the next one. The puzzles are timed and the player is rated based upon how quickly the puzzle is put back together. If the player is really stuck, they can challenge the computer to a roll of the dice or a game of Rock-Paper-Scissors in order to switch the position of one puzzle piece with any other on the board. The caveat here is that the player will be penalized one minute of time if they do so. Players may also view the completed puzzle to assist them, but strangely only a limited number of times. The game is functional, but extremely limited and simplistic, with no real features or frills.

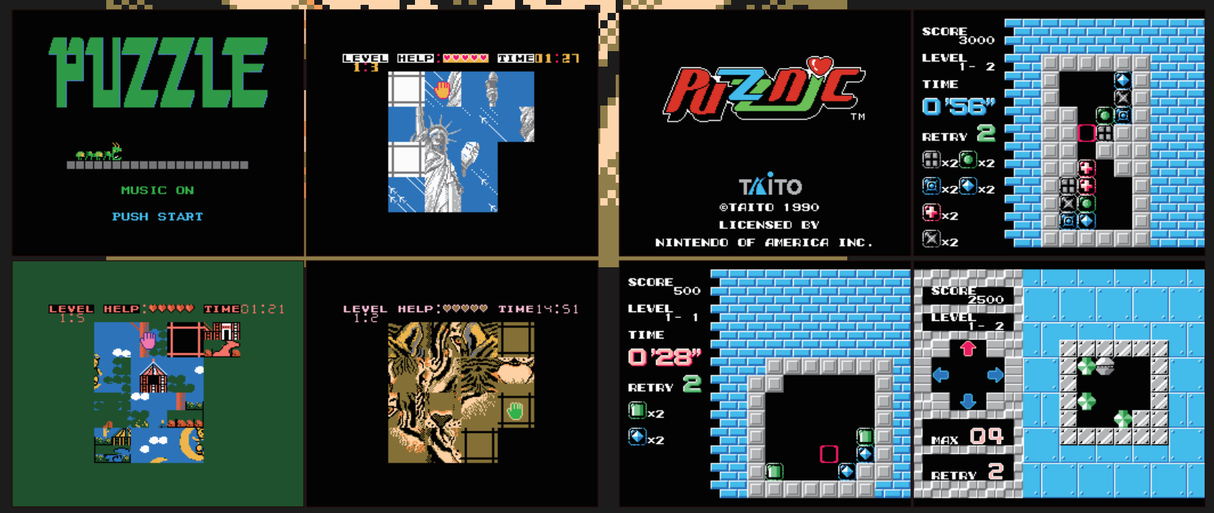
Reflections: Way to reach for the stars, AVE. Was a video game version of Tic-Tac-Toe considered too complex to program? Unless this was a $15 game in 1990 (it wasn't), I cannot imagine this ever being considered a game someone would want to purchase on the NES when it was released. "Hmmm, should I purchase *Super Mario Bros. 3*, the pinnacle of platformers, or should I buy the game that I could also simulate by dumping puzzle pieces of a picture of tiger lilies onto my dining room table?" – PC

Puzznic

Genre: Puzzle
Release Date: Nov. 1990
Developer: Taito
Publisher: Taito
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★★

Sliding tile puzzles meet gravity in this game from Taito. The levels consist of a variety of tiles arranged within unique grid-based playfields. A cursor is used to slide individual tiles left or right; they drop into open spaces and cannot be raised unless they are placed on a moving Elevator Block. When matching tiles touch, they vanish, and if all of them are removed, play proceeds to the next level. The game starts out relatively easy but quickly starts featuring levels that can be rendered unsolvable if the tiles are moved in the wrong order, often leaving one or two stragglers on the screen. Nonetheless, the experience is relatively free from stress. Each level is timed, which seems tense until players realize they have two retries and can continue whenever needed. Also included on the cartridge is a mode called Gravnic, which is almost an entirely new game. The general layout looks similar, but instead of moving tiles one at a time, gravity is controlled with simple presses of the D-pad and A or B to slide all blocks simultaneously. This mode has its own set of challenges and different graphics. Presentation-wise, the game as a whole isn't garish or unpleasant; it's just boring. It could have benefitted from any sort of graphical variance in stages - new tiles, backgrounds, anything. The music and sound effects are also simply fine; they're neither memorable nor annoying. The gameplay can get repetitive after a bit, and this problem is exacerbated by a lack of that addictive, "just one more play" feel. While this might not make it on anyone's list of classics, it is enjoyable and has some clever moments. With a good amount of content to boot, this title is worth a look.

Reflections: This was released on the NES and home computers in 1990, during a period of time when everyone had to have their own killer puzzle game. *Tetris* was already a hit the world over, and the hunt was on to find the next craze. Some of these attempts, such as *Columns* or *Klax*, are forgettable in my opinion. *Puzznic* has no crazy major faults and even tries to do some things differently, but its release timing and somewhat repetitive gameplay sent it into obscurity. – IF

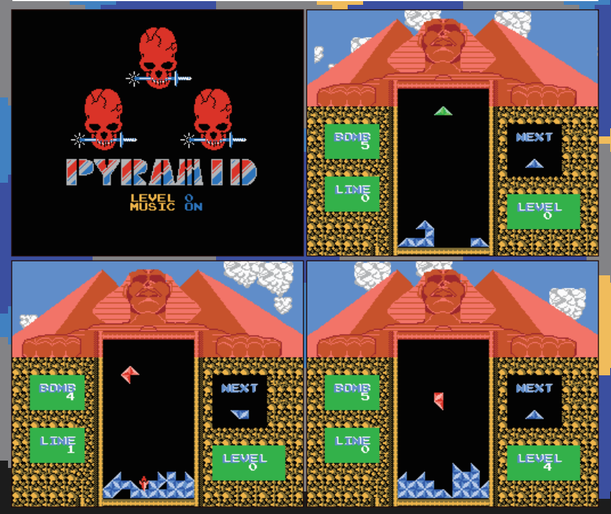


Pyramid

Genre: Puzzle
Release Date: 1990
Developer: Sachen
Publisher: American Video Entertainment
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★

In this puzzle game, players must maneuver falling triangular and trapezoidal stone pieces in a rectangular bank to align them in complete rows, which will eliminate those puzzle pieces and prevent them from stacking to the top and ending the game. Five different pieces ranging from small and large triangles to trapezoids with one triangular side are selected randomly for the player. They fall one at a time and can be rotated and placed on top of other pieces, or maneuvered carefully underneath other pieces with exposed areas. Dependent upon the current layout, at times it can be difficult to waste or "burn" a piece without adding to the clutter and making it even more difficult to create a complete line. Thankfully, the player is given five bombs to start, which can be activated by B + UP and placed to clear away troublesome blocks as the player sees fit (more bombs will be rewarded to the player when they clear at least two lines at once). Players have the option to disable music, and also which level/speed to start at. The level will increase every 20 lines cleared, and will end when the pieces stack to the top, or when the player quits the game. It's a slight spin on other puzzle games, but isn't as intuitive or as fun as others due to the trapezoidal pieces, which don't quite mesh with the mind's eye as easily as squared-off ones. Still, if you're a puzzle game fan looking for a fix, it's competent, if lacking frills or even music that lets it stand out.

Reflections: Okay, the inspiration is *Tetris*, but it's not *Tetris*. It doesn't have the style or draw of that landmark puzzle game. Heck, it doesn't even the panache of *Hatris* or the visual charm of *Klax*. But you know what this game does have? It has three skulls holding maces *in their mouths on the title screen*. It also has a batshit crazy backstory about an archaeologist trying to discover that King Tut invented rock 'n roll (?!) only to discover the "Queen of Fun" instead. When the game begins, someone mumbles "pyramid," although if you don't strain to hear, the garbled word sounds like nearly half of the other "P" words included in the latest edition of Merriam-Webster. The icing on the cake is the back box art, which features the game's description written in the shape of a pyramid. Style points abound, AVE. – PC



Q*bert

Genre: Action
Release Date: Feb. 1989
Developer: Gottlieb
Ported by: Konami
Publisher: Ultra Games
Players: 1–2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

Players take control of the strange creature Q*bert, who is tasked to jump around diagonally on a pyramid layout of blocks to turn them all the same color to move on to the next level. As the orange, large-nosed creature jumps around, he will have to tend with bouncing red balls, Ugg and Wrong-Way (who travel up the pyramid), Slick and Sam (who will jump down the pyramid and revert changed blocks to their original color), and Coily the Snake, who will chase directly after Q*bert. While Q*bert can stop Slick and Sam with contact, he will have to avoid all the other enemies, and also the danger of jumping off the edges of the pyramid. Gameplay requires some strategy in planning a path around enemies, but it is very quick and frantic, with a very high degree of difficulty as players will have to have precise movement and be constantly moving around to avoid death. If the standard maelstrom is not enough, soon the cubes will require two or more color changes instead of a single one. It's a classic arcade-style game with great character design and a quirky concept, but its learning curve is steep, especially just getting used to the control scheme. While there is a great option to map all four diagonal jumps to anywhere on the D-pad, completing coloring these puzzle-like pyramid cubes successfully is not for the faint of heart. A handful of continues are provided to ease the pain, but only the most hardened player will live to see beyond the first several levels.

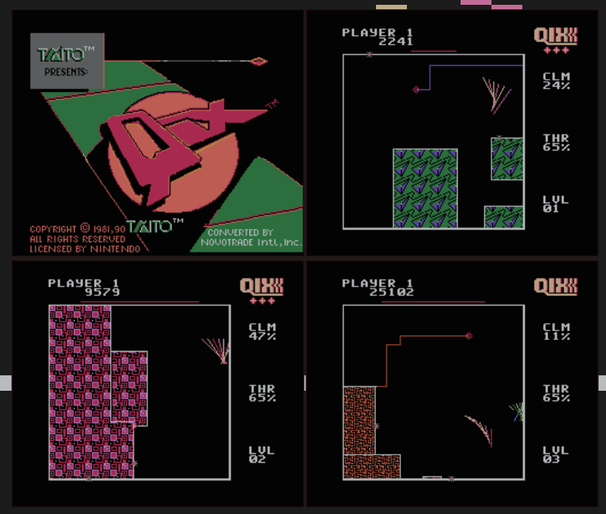
Reflections: One of the classic "golden age" arcade games, *Q*bert* is a treat to play, even if its difficulty is daunting. It was really the only successful Gottlieb-published game, who had much greater success with pinball games. Q*bert was one of the few lucky video characters popular enough in the early '80s to get their own merchandise and even a weird cartoon, where Q*bert strangely is a high schooler in the 1950s. While the game franchise itself wouldn't have the same legs as the Pac-Man franchise overall, I'm still proud of the lil' orange critter with the giant schnoz. I'd be remiss not to mention some of the great arcade elements the NES version lacked, such as the pinball machine knocker that would hit the inside of the cabinet when Q*bert fell off the pyramid, or the strange, garbled synthesized speech that perfectly matched Q*bert's speech-bubbled "@!#?@!" when an enemy got him. – PC

Qix

Genre: Action
Release Date: Jan. 1991
Developer: Taito
Ported by: Novotrade International
Publisher: Taito
Players: 1–2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★½

In this quality port of Taito's abstract arcade game, the player blocks off areas of a blank playfield using a cursor by tracing away from the starting area, out and then back to the initial area to form a new segment. As segments are completed, they fill with a color based upon the speed the player drew them, slow cursor or fast cursor, and points are awarded based on that speed. If the unpredictable moving mass of buzzing energy known as the Qix collides with the cursor in the middle of drawing a block, the player will lose a life. Other enemies such as Sparx will move along completed lines, and the Fuse will zip up an incomplete line if the player stalls while drawing. After a certain percentage of the screen is blocked off and filled, it's on to the next level. After a few introductory stages, players will have to contend with two Qix at the same time. This obviously makes the game harder and forces players into making some quick, rash moves, but also opens up another winning strategy – splitting the two Qix. If the player is able to separate the Qix with a line, then the round ends and a bonus is applied. Overall, this is a very different game from what was in arcades at the time with plenty of interesting strategies and a base gameplay that's just as fresh on the NES.

Reflections: I love playing this game using the tower strategy and trying to split the Qix once two appear on screen. While this game was highly original upon release, the concept was adopted widespread for a number of more seedy games that have the player uncovering pictures of ladies in various states of undress. That's dandy and all but just a touch odd for general arcade release. – IF



Quattro Adventure

Super Adventure Quests *(PAL)*

Genre: Adventure, Compilation
Release Date: 1991
Developer: Codemasters
Publisher: Camerica
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Uncommon
★½

This is a collection of four basic action/adventure games of varying quality, with not one being particularly memorable. *Linus Spacehead*, in which the player must gather parts for a downed spaceship, is the most immediately frustrating as the player begins in a level where they must ascend from the ocean floor, requiring navigation of a random pattern of fast rising bubbles that will only support the player for a moment before popping. Simply getting to anything else is near impossible as many will hit reset as anger sets in. *Super Robin Hood* tasks our hero with recovering treasures from a castle while evading guards, bats, and mediocrity. Robin Hood himself is a fairly large, chunky sprite and has no gracefulness whatsoever. Movement is clunky, even ducking is cumbersome, and firing off an arrow takes far longer than it should for such an esteemed marksman. *Treasure Island Dizzy* could be a fun adventure game as the titular egg maneuvers around various platform and item-filled screens encountering puzzles and using his tools to collect stars, the main objective. Unfortunately, this started as a computer game where you could save progress, and since there are many, many stars but only one life before being being booted to the title screen, this is another game that simply results in head-banging frustration. Lastly, *Boomerang Kid* is a simple arcade-style game in which all boomerangs must be collected before exiting a level. Each level is a single screen with a few enemies to avoid. Oddly, the Boomerang Kid himself has no boomerangs and no boomerangs are ever thrown. It's actually pretty decent for being so simple and is probably the best on the cartridge, as nothing outlandish was attempted. All of these games, however, suffer from horrible, stiff controls and none offer a reason to return.

Reflections: I actually remember this title as worse. *Linus Spacehead* is a complete throwaway and the other games are purely average, but there is something I like about *Boomerang Kid*. The simple, one screen play reminds me of a lot of things I play today, especially as the levels get more difficult. It is, of course, horribly programmed, but the simplest game on the cart is the most solid. – IF

Quattro Arcade

Genre: Action, Compilation
Release Date: 1991
Developer: Codemasters
Publisher: Camerica
Players: 1-2 (alternating & simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★

This multicart compilation consists of four different action and arcade-style titles. *CJ's Elephant Antics* is a platformer where you control an elephant who can attack enemies by spitting from its trunk or lobbing bombs at them. It contains some traps that requires careful movement but isn't very interesting. *Stunt Buggies* is a simple overhead maze game where the player controls a buggy that has to collect all the bombs in each level. A radar map lets the player know where enemy buggies are, who can be temporarily fended off with a smoke screen attack. *F-16 Renegade* is a smooth but mostly no-frills shooter which alternates between vertical overhead and third-person perspective levels. Finally, *Go! Dizzy Go!* is an overhead single screen arcade-style maze game where Dizzy the egg has to obtain all the fruit on each stage. Dizzy has to avoid enemies but can push blocks into them to destroy them. All games are competently made and technically fine with colorful graphics and fun music, but they are all fairly straightforward and lack complex gameplay ideas and elements. They may be fun for a quick spin but are not titles you can get lost in.

Reflections: As the only Quattro game that is close to average, I have to wonder if any of these games were conceptualized originally as being standalone games, and then somewhere along the way they were decided as too simple and thrown together on this compilation cart. I don't expect every game on a multicart to be excellent, but then again maybe I'm being naive in thinking that they can possibly be above average. I mean, why would a company waste a very good game by condemning it to die on a compilation? Sorry if you thought I'd rate this one higher. Awww, was this Quattro review the real reason you purchased this book? Well it's too late to change your mind now! Hahahahahaha! – PC

Quattro Sports

Super Sports Challenge *(PAL)*
Genre: Sports, Compilation
Release Date: 1991
Developer: Codemasters
Publisher: Camerica
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Uncommon
★

This sports multicart consists of four badly made games. *Baseball* looks fine and functions on the surface, but the terrible, defensive AI makes the game jokingly inept and a non-simulation. Inexplicably, only the shortstop and pitcher can field balls in the infield and outfielders do not move towards the ball until it is almost on top of them – then the player can control their movement. *Soccer Simulator* could be the "highlight," a vertical overhead soccer title that has players with ridiculous speed and very easy scoring, resulting in this simple game being playable, but otherwise a bore. An impressive first-person penalty kick is a pleasant surprise. *Pro Tennis* is impressive for just how broken and amateurish the gameplay is, with a tournament mode that you'll not want to play through. *BMX Simulator* is a laughably bad single-screen overhead bike racing game with obstacles and strange controls that looks like it was programmed in a day – but there are three different tracks to choose from at least. Recommended only if you'd like to witness a car crash of multiple sports games in one neat package.

Reflections: The Camerica games were sometimes sold on television through The Home Shopping Network in the United States. I think this is how my cousin ended up with this game as a child. After we played it one time and turned it off after five minutes, it always remained untouched in the same place afterwards – golden, dusty, and unwanted. – PC

R.B.I. Baseball

Genre: Sports
Release Date: June 1988
Developer: Namco, Atari Games
Publisher: Tengen
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed / Unlicensed
Availability: Common (Licensed), Very Common (Unlicensed)
★★★⋆

This arcade-style baseball title features 10 selectable teams: the four top Major League Baseball teams from both the 1986 and 1987 seasons as well the National and American League All-Star teams. Although lacking the MLB team license, this was the first NES game to feature real MLB players along with rudimentary playing attributes for batters and pitchers. Batting and pitching are both very smooth. When batting, players can maneuver around the batter's box and swing or bunt. Pitchers can adjust speed, the curve of the ball, or even attempt a sinker. The smooth and responsive controls make this exchange fun. Fielding, however, is a very mixed bag. While the ability to throw or run to any base is there, fielders all move at an extremely slow speed, throws are usually underpowered, and at times can even miss the base entirely. The CPU fielders fare worse, as their AI isn't sufficient. They will sometimes throw to a base without a fielder in place and do not seem to be able to handle when runners are on first and third, always allowing runners on first to advance to second. The "randomness" of fielding errors occurs far too often during a game, making defensive play more a factor of chance than it should be. The lack of the "infield fly rule" also is troublesome. The cartoony presentation of the players and field/stadium is pleasant, as are the sounds and music. Game modes are limited to a short "season" where you can take on each of the other nine teams once, but at least the two-player mode offers a nice best of seven series. There's just enough baseball evolution here for a fun session with the computer or a friend, but there isn't quite enough for a deep experience. Note: available in both licensed and unlicensed versions.

Reflections: I understand the love many gamers hold for *R.B.I. Baseball*. For many, it was their first baseball game experience, and I'm sure the affinity they still hold for the game is due to the arcade-style fun and recognizing and playing as beloved players from the late '80s. However, when players claim it is the "best baseball game on the NES," they may be fooling themselves. It's in the top half of the baseball titles on the NES for sure, but in my opinion fails to crack the top five on the system. I know it's charming to bat as a chubby Darryl Strawberry, but at some point the gameplay and features have to be taken into account when judging a game. – PC

R.B.I. Baseball 2

Genre: Sports
Release Date: 1990
Developer: Tengen
Publisher: Tengen
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Common
★★★⋆

The second baseball game in the series features full rosters of all 26 MLB teams based upon the 1989 season, as well as two all-star teams. Like the original, pitching, batting, and fielding controls are all smooth, making the arcade-style gameplay enjoyable. Some of the same issues remain in the field as in the first: underpowered throwing, too many errors, etc., but defenders move slightly quicker and the ability to dive/jump for the ball has been added, improving the defensive play slightly. This game eschews the cartoon style of the first game for more realistic depictions of players; however, some of the familiar sights and sounds of the original remain, like when home runs are hit and fireworks explode above the scoreboard. More options are available, such as the ability to switch hit (not automatic), and there's even an instant replay function. A short season mode returns (with password save), as well as the seven-game playoff against a second player. While problems persist, this title builds upon the solid foundation of the first, and provides an enjoyable baseball experience.

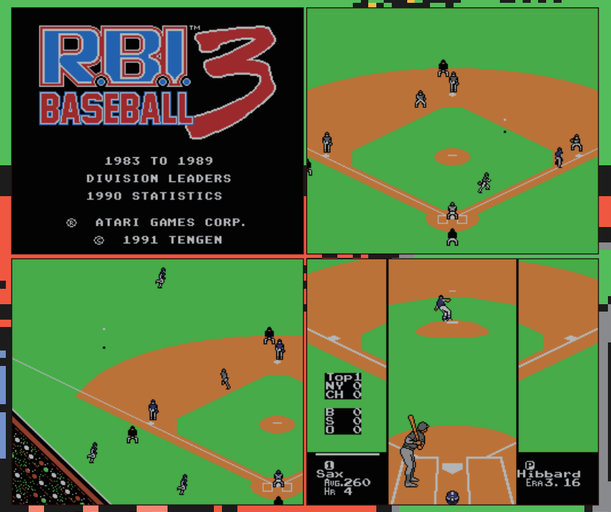
Reflections: I'm sure some will be critical of the "upgraded" look versus the cartoon players of the original, but that is probably due to Atari's style choice versus the original's (*Pro Yakyuu: Family Stadium*) developers, Namco. It seems that Atari acquired the code outright, as the game feels just about the same, but then decided to update the graphics a bit. However, they kept just enough of the original music/sounds around to not totally eliminate the lineage of the series entirely. – PC

R.B.I. Baseball 3

Genre: Sports
Release Date: 1991
Developer: Tengen
Publisher: Tengen
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★⯪

The third baseball game of the series is almost a carbon copy of the sequel, but with updated teams/rosters based upon the 1990 MLB season. An added bonus is the ability to play as any of the divisional winning teams from 1983-1989. The game looks and plays just about the same as before: decent graphics and smooth controls make for a fun arcade experience on the diamond. However, the problems in the field persist: questionable computer AI, underpowered throws, slow defenders, and too many errors when catching pop flies. These issues do not seem to be alleviated even when the computer is set to "hard difficulty." The franchise still has not adopted attributes for players on the defensive side, which is a shame. The same short season mode via password and the two-player playoff mode continue here, but there is little else to differentiate itself. Similarly, the same options return, such as the instant replay function, which seems to initiate far too often by itself. If you're looking for a game that's basically a competent baseball title with a roster update of real MLB teams, here it is. If you're looking for something greater, you won't find it.

Reflections: If there was ever the case for an NES game that mirrored a *Madden Football* entry into the franchise (besides *Mega Man 4-6*), it would be *R.B.I. Baseball 3*. We're talking roster updates, some additional bonus teams, some music changes and minor changes in the field visuals – and that's it. I'm not sure if the *R.B.I. Baseball* franchise in 1991 had such a hardcore following that they could get away with what amounts to an expansion pack. Then again, I doubt that Tengen gamers were your typical NES players. Either way, it's not like they are still upgrading the ROM of *R.B.I. Baseball 3* with up-to-date rosters like they do with *Tecmo Super Bowl* each year; which shows that it only took two games in one franchise to reach perfection, while three games in another was still not even close. The R.B.I. series would continue on the Sega Genesis console for future installments. – PC

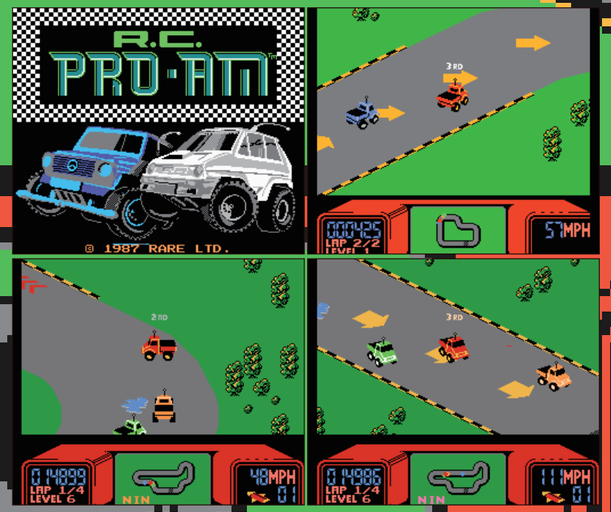


R.C. Pro-Am

Genre: Racing, Action
Release Date: Mar. 1988
Developer: Rare
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★⯪

This isometric racing game features the player against three CPU opponents where the vehicles are tiny radio-controlled cars. Races take place across a large variety of tracks, 24 in total, in which the goal is to place in the top three to continue. Players can find weapons on the field for forward and rear attacks, such as missiles and bombs, and can also find upgrades: tires for better handling, better acceleration, and higher top speed. There are also limited invincibility pick-ups available, which will temporarily spin out other racers if they are run into. Scattered throughout the tracks are shiny letter tiles that when collected spell NINTENDO and give one's vehicle a big visual and performance upgrade. There are also hazards such as water puddles, barriers, and oil slicks to watch out for, as well as fun zipper arrow speed bursts that should be run over to ensure players keep up with the others. A very small portion of the course can be seen at once, but a map on the bottom of the screen is helpful. The game is cute and fun but also very difficult and long. Getting used to the initially slippery handling of the cars makes turns very tricky. Making it through all the courses on the limited continues provided is definitely a test of skill, but watching the trophy case fill after every victory makes for satisfying progression. A racer worth the effort required to master.

Reflections: Man, this is one of those games I am simply awful at playing, constantly riding the side of the track as I struggle to maintain a good racing line. It isn't the game, though, as I've seen it played well and I get pangs of sadness thinking about the fun I could be having. The wording on the title screen seems to allude to that there is a two-player mode when there isn't, something that had friends and me searching in vain in the pre-internet days. – IF



R.C. Pro-Am II

Genre: Racing, Action
Release Date: Dec. 1992
Developer: Rare
Publisher: Tradewest
Players: 1-4 (simultaneous)
Special Features: NES Four Score / Satellite compatible
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★★⯪

In this radio-controlled car racing sequel, players again take to 24 tracks to try and capture the championship against three opponents. The isometric tracks provide fast-paced action, featuring many twists, turns, ramps, and even arrowed fast lanes that will give cars a great speed burst. Besides being outrun, racers have to worry about being taken out by several different types of weapons as well, such as missiles and bombs. Winning races gives the player points for the circuit (more for better placement), but placing last will result in the player having to use one of the limited continues. Tracks contain many goodies to be picked up, including extra cash, ammo (for purchased weapons), nitro boosts, extra continues (may also be purchased), and many hazards (oil slicks, ice, bombs). A very important pick-up item on the courses are letters that can spell "RC PRO-AM II," which if completed will upgrade the truck to better vehicles up to two times. Accumulated cash may be used to upgrade the racer's engine, tires, and used to purchase a weapon and ammo for the car, nitro boosts, or defensive items. The difficulty is pretty staunch, so learning to handle the curves via the slippery turning controls is key to getting deep into the circuit. The racing is a blast either way. A handy map lets you know what's coming up on the track, since it's hard to see that far ahead. A couple of mini games (tug-of-war and drag racing) help break up the action, and since up to four players can share in the zany action, this great racing title can even become a party experience.

Reflections: Talk about an upgrade. One of the biggest faults of the original *R.C. Pro-Am* has to be the lack of a two-player mode, which this game not just rectifies, but then offers three or four as well. The tracks are of a better variety this time out too, and there's added strategy via choosing how and when to upgrade, whether going short-term or saving your coins for a more substantial upgrade later (if you survive). And yes, the multiplayer is not perfect; there's no split screen (come on, this isn't the N64), and it's not like you can leave the other players in the dust since they're just pushed back up once they leave the screen. Still, Rare did what they could here, and even if it's not radically different from the original (why would it be?), they fixed the holes of the original and expanded the experience at the same time. It's just too bad that the game is somewhat tough to come by. – PC

Race America

Corvette ZR-1 Challenge *(PAL)*

Genre: Racing
Release Date: May 1992
Developer: Imagineering
Publisher: Absolute Entertainment
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★

The racing game consists of the player facing off against eight different drivers one-on-one as they cross the United States of America. Gameplay begins in a side-scrolling drag race and then continues in a more traditional third-person perspective for the rest of the race. What is interesting about the controls is the semi-realistic shifting: players must release the accelerator button when up and down-shifting with the D-pad. Unfortunately, not much else is a highlight, as the races themselves aren't too interesting, although controls are fairly smooth. The only real challenge will come from the player trying to avoid other vehicles who seemingly want to crash into them. An inexplicable design choice can be seen when the player falls behind the computer driver. At that point, the player's view will shift from the main view screen to the much smaller one at the bottom. It's confusing and very difficult to view and play from in comparison. Other than some nifty art design and ethnic-stereotypical drivers, such as Ito Speedo and Mike Linguini, there isn't anything memorable to this title.

Reflections: The European version of this game was entitled *Corvette ZR-1 Challenge* and featured a license for both the name and use of vehicle imagery in the game... not that that would make the game any more interesting to play.

The developers, Imagineering (also of *Barbie* fame), were based out of Glen Rock, New Jersey. Glen Rock is known regionally for comedic performer Uncle Floyd and for their lunch meats (I think Glen Rock Ham is from there?). I never visited Glen Rock while I lived in New Jersey, but it's nice to know that at least one mediocre NES developer was from my home Garden State. – PC

Racket Attack

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Oct. 1988
Developer: TOSE
Publisher: Jaleco
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★★

Take it onto the courts in this very good tennis simulation. The player selects either from eight female players or eight male players (all with their own skills/strengths) and the court type (hard, grass, or clay). It's a tournament-style event where the player must defeat all of the other eight players in successive matches. The gameplay is very developed, featuring forehand, backhand, slices, volleys, lobs, and smashes. Controls are smooth and intuitive, as the player will strike with either a backhand or forehand based upon their position to the incoming ball, and will either hit the ball straight or to either direction based upon how soon the ball is struck when incoming, echoing reality. Serving is also pretty fun and becomes a mini game of strategy of sorts on its own, in terms of where to position the player and place the ball to go for a potential ace. There are also other details in the game that really add to the experience, such as the colorful and loud crowd, the great voice samples calling out the action and score, and even the ability to argue with the umpire about a close call on occasion. The graphics and animation are nice as well, with fairly big sprites on the colorful court. It all comes together to form a very enjoyable and somewhat deep tennis experience.

Reflections: My friend Kevin had this game (geez, that spoiled brat had a lot), and we used to play this one together in between bouts of *DuckTales* and *T&C*. This game did a good job of not putting either human player at an advantage, as the sides of the court were swapped out with the players as they would be in a real tennis match.

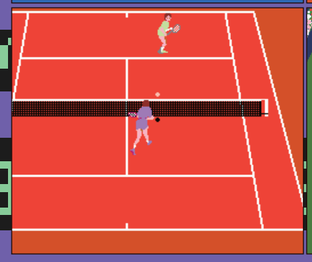
I don't remember how it happened, or how to even repeat it, but the player arguing with the umpire is hysterical. I remember playing the game for probably three hours before triggering it one time randomly, and the umpire shouting "No!" at the player was both funny and incredibly random, as it's not documented in the manual at all. – PC

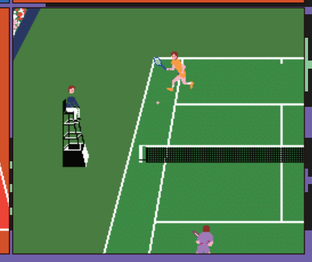
Rad Racer

Genre: Racing
Release Date: Oct. 1987
Developer: Square
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1
Special Features: 3D Mode (optional)
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⯪

In this racing game the player chooses either a Ferrari or an F-1 racer and must rally through eight different courses complete with checkpoints. It's a race against the clock while avoiding other cars and obstacles on the side of the road. Hitting the checkpoints will extend the race time, but crashing will drain valuable time off the clock. Arrows on the bottom of the screen track the overall race progress. The gameplay requires fine reflexes to navigate the tight turns (road signs warn you) and weave through the other cars successfully, so it's good that the controls are up to the task. The speed of the game is conveyed very well through the sounds of the car's acceleration and how quickly the courses pass by you. Controls are fine but not perfect. However, the skidding in turns and fighting to recover feels great. Graphics are pretty good and get the job done with decent-sized car sprites and the different course backgrounds, the night racing courses being a highlight. The game allows you to choose one of three pretty good music tracks while you are racing, a rarity for an NES game. It's a solid, well-done racing game that provides a good challenge, especially in later courses when cars begin to actively target you as you try and pass them. The optional 3D mode with the included cardboard glasses is mostly a subpar gimmick, but it's a nice bonus at least to have available.

Reflections: Ah, *Rad Racer*. It's one of those games that nearly every kid played on the NES at one point or another, and it's the best known racing game on the system by far. The 3D mode was almost never played by anyone I ever knew, as you were more likely to get eye strain and ridicule from your friends than a better gaming experience. The pause-unpause trick after you crash (to lose less time off the clock) is one of the earliest NES tricks I remember learning from the *Nintendo Fun Club* magazine, and you know what, it works! Kinda. – PC





Rad Racer II

Genre: Racing
Release Date: June 1990
Developer: Square
Publisher: Square
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⯪

This racing sequel again features the player controlling a Ferrari and blazing through eight different courses at different geographic locations. Players have a time limit and each course has two checkpoints that must be reached to extend that time (and the race). Graphics are improved a bit over the original game, with the 3D scaling effects a tad more refined, and the controls are a little bit smoother and more precise in trying to stay on the road. The gameplay is almost identical to the original, with the player having to avoid oncoming cars, many of which will seemingly try to run into you. An improvement over the original is the heads up display, which not only features the player's total race progress (like the original) but also a helpful arrow which lets the player know of any upcoming turns and bends in the road. The music, which can be selected before each race, is not that memorable, though, and unfortunately, the car's engine's sound effects can only be heard when the music option is turned off. This game is extremely challenging to the point of unfair, as players must not only prevent themselves from crashing, but also must ensure to navigate turns correctly as to not lose too much speed. Even if a player doesn't crash during a race, that will not guarantee victory past the first two or three courses. It's another fine effort, although it's a step sideways from the original, and not an improvement.

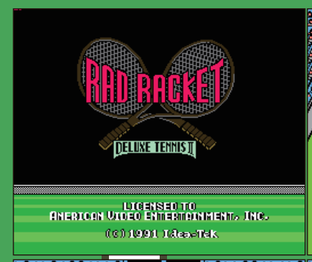
Reflections: *Rad Racer II* is usually never discussed or mentioned in the pantheon of NES games. The first game of course is lauded, but the sequel? Not really. This is probably partially due to the fact that Nintendo did not publish the sequel, but Square (the developers of both games) took the reigns this time out. Square was smart to avoid throwing in another gimmicky 3D mode (who wants to waste money making those cardboard glasses?), and they eliminated the F-1 racer option from the original, angering approximately 34 people. – PC

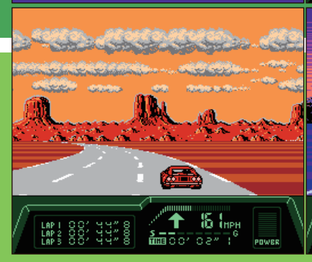
Rad Racket: Deluxe Tennis II

Genre: Sports
Release Date: 1991
Developer: Idea-Tek
Publisher: American Video Entertainment
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Rare
★⯪

This tennis title consists of single game action on either a grass, clay, or hard court. After selecting one of six tennis players with different play strengths, the action begins. The controls are very shaky – pressing B will swing the racket on the left side of the player while A will swing it on the right. It takes getting used to and removes a precious button that could have been used for a different type of swing, such as a lob, which does not exist in the game. One has to be very precise with the timing of the swing as well; waiting until the ball is right on top of the player before swinging is what works best, with the direction then dependent upon how quickly or late the button is pressed. There is a net smash but no volleying, which is odd, especially since the strengths of at least one player denote net play. There are no real options or play modes here besides simultaneous two-player action, which strangely does not offer competitive singles play but only a cooperative doubles game against the computer. Graphics, surprisingly or not, are pretty good, although the minimal sound effects are drowned out by a single, overly cheerful music track. When the only true highlight of the game is Ross, the "Rad Racket Rodent" who randomly scurries around the court from time to time (much to the disgust of the judge), you're better off finding another tennis game to rally with.

Reflections: Well, the whimsical creativity was certainly here. I love the John McEnroe parody player named Macaroni, and Ross the Rad Racket Rodent is so incredibly random and pointless that it's brilliant. But besides that, there's nothing here that stands out at all. Sports games usually have a pretty high bar set in my opinion, in that they have to at least somewhat represent the action of the sport. If you cannot come close, why bother with the game at all? Why not just do another shooter or platformer instead? Why put out a sports game that you know people are going to be disappointed with? Answer me, American Video Entertainment! – PC





Raid 2020

Genre: Action
Release Date: 1989
Developer: Color Dreams
Publisher: Color Dreams
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★

Shadow must defeat all the evil drug lords in the land, eventually leading up to a confrontation against Pitbull, the evil kingpin. The game consists of five levels: three side-scrolling run and gun shooter levels and two vehicular horizontal-shooting segments. Shadow's weapon is a pistol, which can be upgraded to wave shots or a spinning orb shot. Only one shot from him can appear on screen, however, so players must take careful aim or the previous shot will be eliminated. Shadow can hop on and off any enemy, which allows him to reach the power-ups, which are mostly kept high in the sky. Besides hearts to replenish health, the main pick-ups in the game are cocaine, money, and suitcases, all of which grant Shadow an extra life when he has amassed a certain number. Jetpacks and vehicles are also available in spots to fly around the run and gun stages easier. The goal in each level is to defeat all of a certain type of enemy, reach the end and proceed. In the run and gun levels, this will involve the player entering different buildings to find items and enemies. At the level's end, if the player has not defeated all of the required enemy type, play will restart at the beginning and ask you to finish wiping out the various dealers, helicopters, or yes, spaceships to continue. This is frustrating, as many enemies will not trigger and spawn. The key? Enter the menu screen and exit, which will then cause them to appear. This can only be stumbled upon by accident. Controls are immediately awful and the coding is a mess. Pressing UP or DOWN in a side-scrolling, isometric level will actually move the player diagonally back and up or forward and down. Not only is this disorienting, but there are mines everywhere in nearly every level, and one touch will kill our hero Shadow. With no checkpoints, this becomes a huge problem. In the vehicle-shooter levels, the controls are slippery and lack any precision. Enemies are insanely aggressive and it's not uncommon to be killed immediately if the player doesn't start moving. Levels range from mundane, like a pier, to absolutely ludicrous, like space bases and futuristic cities. Enemies range from generic trench-coated thugs to cyborgs to butterflies and birds. Those birds and insects do just as much damage as bullets. Overall, the game is a nearly unplayable mess but the sheer insanity makes it at least worth a single look.

Reflections: This was obviously a product of the same War on Drugs hysteria that birthed *NARC*. Not only does this sort of dystopian storyline feed back into fears of drug dealers with knives hiding around every corner, but it profits from it at the same time. I don't view that as a particularly classy move. – IF

Raid on Bungeling Bay

Genre: Shooter, Strategy
Release Date: Sept. 1987
Developer: Will Wright
Ported by: Hudson Soft
Publisher: Brøderbund Software
Players: 1–2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★⋆

In this port of the 1984 Commodore 64 game, the Bungeling Empire is constructing a War Machine to dominate the world! As a helicopter pilot, you must raid six factories on Bungeling Bay's islands and halt production. This overhead shooter offers real-time strategy, smooth multi-directional scrolling, and a large map (which wraps infinitely). However, its scenes and gameplay change little, and music is minimal. From the title screen, you can choose Game A, Game B (which starts on a more difficult level), or a two-player game where a second person controls the Bungeling turrets and shoots bullets and missiles. Your helicopter has "tank controls," with UP accelerating, DOWN decelerating, LEFT or RIGHT turning, B bombing, and A shooting your unlimited gun. The HUD shows your score, bombs, remaining factories, a compass pointing to your aircraft carrier, and your damage, which counts upwards (after it reaches 100, you crash). With accumulating damage, your controls deteriorate, and the water changes from blue to red. Time isn't on your side, although there's no overt limit. It takes multiple bombs to destroy factories, and the required amount increases in later rounds, plus they recover damage until obliterated. "DESTROY" or "SPECIAL" appears on the screen once they're demolished, and the land darkens a bit. You carry nine bombs, and returning to the carrier replenishes them, but Bungeling boats, tanks, turrets, and planes attack you and your carrier. An "ALERT" appears when your carrier is under attack, and you'll permanently lose it if it's sunk. Hidden Brøderbund logos are then your only hope for bombs. Destroying radar dishes deters air strikes. Eventually, the Bungelings build a battleship, and a "WARNING" flashes when it's approaching your ship. There's no real ending and the game loops, which may put off some players, but it's still a simple, enjoyable experience.

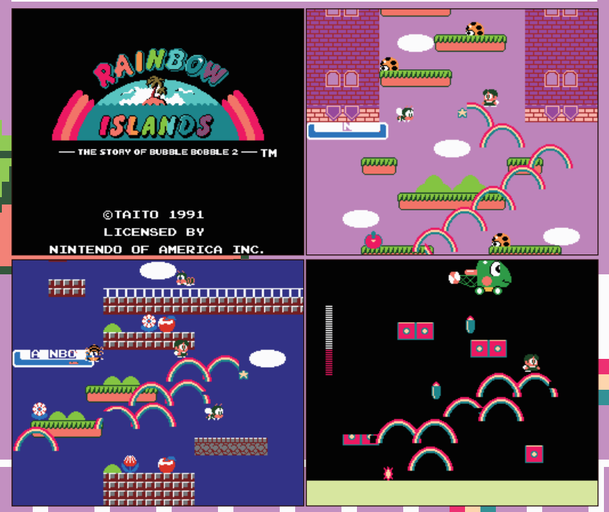
Reflections: The original Japanese Famicom port is from 1985 (hence its quaintness). Compared to the Commodore 64 version, it's more colorful and comprehensible but less complex and missing a cutscene. It was in arcades on the Nintendo VS. System, looking identical aside from a different title screen and HUD, plus a helpful world map showing factory locations (the C64 box included a paper map, but the NES got neither). The Bungeling Empire are also antagonists in other Brøderbund titles. Designer Will Wright enjoyed creating the cities of Bungeling Bay, hatching his idea for *SimCity*. An NES version of *SimCity* was nearly completed but never released. – KN

Rainbow Islands: The Story of Bubble Bobble 2

Genre: Platformer
Release Date: June 1991
Developer: Taito
Ported by: Disco
Publisher: Taito
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★⋆

Bubby sets out to save his island friends in this colorful and innovative platformer. Using rainbows, Bubby must vertically scale platforming stages, avoiding dangers like spikes while maneuvering around and taking out cute enemies. The rainbows that Bubby shoots (which disappear after a few seconds) act like colorful platforms that Bubby can run onto and jump off of to advance up the level. The rainbow can also be used as a shield from enemies, or an offensive weapon that can zap enemies or collapse on them by jumping into the rainbow when on top. Destroyed enemies will leave behind various items, including power-ups to increase Bubby's speed and the ability to shoot double rainbows (whoa!). The gameplay is very addictive, as the quick rainbow-climbing action is extremely smooth and makes getting around the stages a blast. Players can choose to blaze quickly through levels if skilled enough, but taking time to be prudent and eliminate enemies is safer, and the only sure-fire way to find and collect all seven colored diamonds in each island world (spelling "rainbow"). If these are all found, the player can gain a giant diamond after defeating the boss of that island. All seven giant diamonds are needed to unlock the eighth island in order to achieve the true ending of the game. However, if a player is not quick enough in any one stage, the island will sink (and water will rise), forcing the player to hurry. While simplistic and not competitive early, the challenge ramps up steadily, while the varying world themes with accompanying enemy types keep things fresh. Boasting cute graphics, fun boss fights, memorable music, fun power-ups, and nice cutscenes, this island-hopping adventure is a rainbow-colored treat.

Reflections: The "true" sequel to *Bubble Bobble*, *Rainbow Islands* is a huge departure in terms of gameplay from the first game, however it maintains the same tone and charm while utilizing the same characters (Bub and Bob in their human forms). It's unclear to me why Taito decided to go in such a radical direction for the second game, but I'm very glad that they did – and more publishers could take a lesson here in experimentation and innovation instead of playing it safe when it comes to sequels. *cough* *Mega Man* *cough* – PC



Rally Bike

Genre: Racing
Release Date: Sept. 1990
Developer: Toaplan
Ported by: Visco
Publisher: Romstar
Players: 1–2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

In this overhead motorcycle racer, the player must qualify for the next race by finishing the current one in a minimum qualifying rank. This is accomplished by passing the other racers or via their crashing. Power-ups are available in the form of turbo boosts, more effective gasoline, limited invincibility, or even side cars to help crash into other racers. The player must be wary of running out of fuel, which can be replenished via gasoline icons or stopping for a fill up at specific spots (it will cost the player five places in the race that will have to be made up). One hit or touch of anything, obstacle, hazard, or another racer, will crash you and take away a life, so players must always be alert for danger on the tight roads. Slowing down in places is definitely needed in order to weave around nimbly, as going all out all the time can quickly result in a crash. Helicopters will appear at times to drop points or other pick-ups, and there's even the ability to jump into the back of trucks and use them to drive on the road and run down the other cycles. Controls are fine for what they are, but this is a difficult game, as there are plenty of other racers to avoid and the obstacles can be tough to navigate. It's a no-frills arcade-style racer that's competently made, if not too complex, with a cheerful tone.

Reflections: There's really no motorcycle racing game on the NES (*Excitebike* is technically motocross dirt-bikes), so I'm sort of glad that *Rally Bike* is there to fill that hole. Not that it would have sold less systems otherwise I suppose. I doubt this would have been the title that would prevent people from buying a Sega system instead so they could play *Hang-On*. But who knows? Maybe it was a defensive maneuver from Nintendo of America to prevent those few disgruntled video game motorcycle-racing fans from doing just that. – PC

Rambo

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: May 1988
Developer: Pack-In-Video
Publisher: Acclaim Entertainment
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

You're Rambo and back in Vietnam to rescue POWs in this side-scroller. Divided into sections connected by a maze of (sometimes inconsistent) paths, the labyrinthine world design adds challenge, but it's unnecessarily disorienting. A number of screens have a compass marker denoting where you can press UP to move north or south to another set of screens. However, some areas appear identical, or you might enter a screen, turn around, and return to a completely different spot. To progress, you must sequentially talk to NPCs in certain places. You can duck, attack, jump, and leap up and down platform levels. By default, you use a knife but can find throwing knives, arrows, guns, and grenades. Numbers at the top of the screen show your life, experience, strength level, weapons, and medicine. You begin with 100 life points, which can be replenished with medicine and hearts (which also increase life capacity) that enemies drop. When you reach zero life, it's game over, but you have infinite continues. You level up with experience points gained from defeating enemies, increasing your attack. Pressing START pauses, but when you're talking to NPCs, it opens the status screen, showing statistics, inventory, and a save code. Enemies get progressively stronger, initially including only jungle animals such as snakes, tigers, and birds (plus disconsonant baddies such as skeletons); more difficult soldiers are introduced later. Bosses usually aren't required, but the motorcyclist, flying robot, giant spider, and others are unique. There's also a non-combat sequence where you play as Rambo's friend, Co. The music is repetitive but serviceable, and the graphics are competent, with surprisingly varied environments ranging from swamps and cliffs to military bases. The stiff, almost buggy way everything moves and handles is the issue. It's not a terrible title, but it's expendable.

Reflections: I saw this game at the video store as a kid but didn't rent it. "Rambo" sounded familiar, but since the movies were R-rated, I hadn't seen them. Like many others, I was reminded of its existence in adulthood by the Angry Video Game Nerd. It looked interesting, so I played it for myself afterwards and didn't think it was that bad. Its clunky attempt to adapt the story of *First Blood Part II* is laudable considering that it was uncommon then to see characters and cutscenes in games. There have been worse licenced titles, and this isn't awful. – KN

Rampage

Genre: Action
Release Date: Dec. 1988
Developer: Bally Midway
Ported by: Data East
Publisher: Data East
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

The player takes control of a gigantic monster and destroys cities in this somewhat humorous action game. Using either Lizzie the lizard or George the gorilla, the player has to take out high rise buildings by climbing on their sides and punching holes in them until they collapse. When they begin to rumble, the player should jump off the building or risk getting damaged in the fall. When all buildings are destroyed on the single screen stages, the player advances to the next level. The military are out to stop the monsters in the form of tanks, helicopters, and soldiers who fire at you almost constantly. Thankfully, players have a somewhat healthy energy bar to counter almost constantly being hit by bullets and missiles. The monsters can regain health by eating humans that are on the ground or found in buildings. There are also some food items that can be found in buildings, but be careful, as eating objects like toasters can be harmful. The game's premise is very unique, the tone is quirky, and it's fun to destroy city after city, even if it does get monotonous after a while, with no real differences between cities. The two-player mode can add some spice for a bit, as you can punch the other player, besides the city buildings.

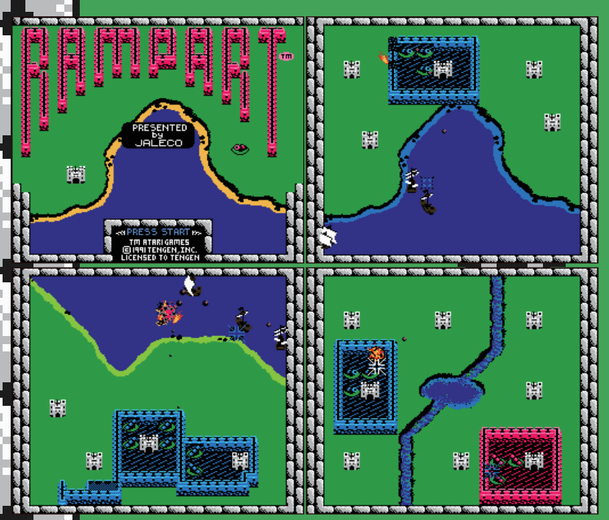
Reflections: *Rampage* is a game that a lot of people are very fond of, but not anyone will select as their favorite arcade game. The game gets boring very quickly since the cities repeat and repeat with little to differentiate them besides them getting gradually more difficult. Even in two-player mode, the game drags on like no tomorrow and requires little skill, since you can continue without end if you want to sit through all 128 "smashing" levels. Ha, see what I did there? – PC

Rampart

Genre: Action, Strategy
Release Date: Jan. 1992
Developer: Atari Games
Ported by: Bitmasters
Publisher: Jaleco
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★

In this port of the strategy arcade game, the player takes control of a walled castle in an overhead view of an island. Cannons are placed by the player inside the castle which are used to defend and destroy the ships who attack with their own cannons (single-player mode) or an opposing castle firing with their own cannons (two-player mode). Several timed rounds occur where players will aim with a cursor to fire on their enemies, while they fire back and destroy the castle walls. The player is then given a limited amount of time to rebuild the castle walls, using one of several random pieces at a time in order to surround at least one castle to continue without a penalty. The walls can also be expanded in order to place more earned cannons. Additional castles can also be surrounded for greater control/flexibility and cannon placement. It's a simple concept but challenging, especially in later rounds when the number and ferocity of the ships increase, and when land units are also deployed to harass the player. Controls are adapted well from the arcade's trackball, and the sound is pretty close to the arcade, even including most of the voice samples. Although simple, it's a unique and exciting action, and destroying a second player's castle is delectable.

Reflections: *Rampart* is one of those "easy to learn, difficult to master" games that, unlike *Othello*, won't put you totally to sleep. The two-player mode is fun, if the rules themselves aren't the most fair, as the player ahead the entire game can still lose if they fail to surround their castle with a wall at the end of the last round. There's also a bit of dark humor in the game, as the losing player is seemingly going to be executed via a guillotine, only to have the blade fall off at the last second. The single-player mode gets very difficult later on, when those dumb little termite-like land units start destroying your castles and cannons. – PC

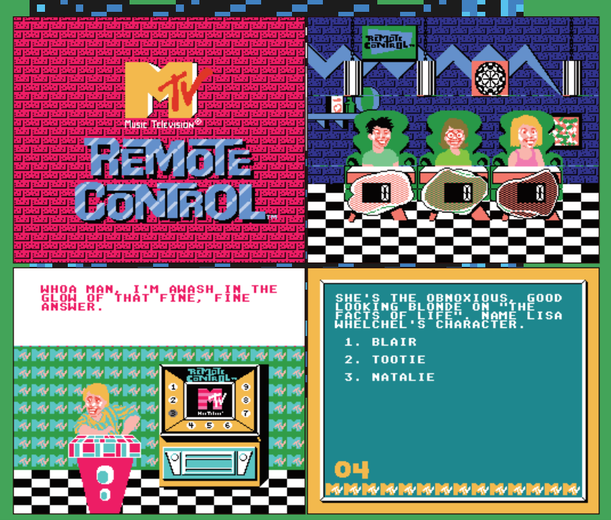


Remote Control

Genre: Game Show, Trivia
Release Date: May 1990
Developer: Riedel Software Productions
Publisher: Hi Tech Expressions
Players: 1-3 (sImultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

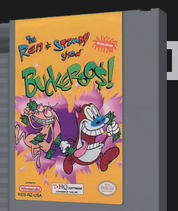
Based upon the MTV pop culture trivia show, this title consists of up to three human players answering questions pertaining to music, television, and movies. After selecting the number of human players and characters, the game begins. Players select their questions from one of nine categories that appear as numbered light-bulbs surrounding a television. The category is not known until selected, and then players are asked multiple choice questions. The player with the correct answer can then choose another question in the same category or another. After a couple of rounds, the players with the two highest scores will go on to the "lightning round" to decide the winner. Although some questions are based upon late '80s and earlier pop culture, they are still interesting and aren't impossible given the format. The game also manages to fit in some of the elements and humor found from the television show, including the "snack time" interlude, humorous non sequiturs from the host, and "guests" that show up from time to time to either give or take points away from players. Although the time it takes to move from one question to the next could be quicker, and the questions may be limited in their overall scope of knowledge, the game is fine for what it sets out to accomplish.

Reflections: I used to watch MTV's *Remote Control* from time to time when it was on. While I don't remember many of the details now, it was most notable for helping launch careers of some of the comedians who appeared on the show, such as Colin Quinn, Denis Leary, and Adam Sandler. This was a pretty good seller on the NES, and one I remember playing quite often with a friend. – PC



The Ren & Stimpy Show: Buckeroo$!

Genre: Action, Shooter
Release Date: Nov. 1993
Developer: Imagineering
Publisher: THQ
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★



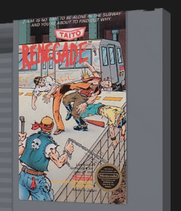
The wacky duo of Ren Hoek and Stimpson J. Cat come alive in this video game translation of the Nickelodeon cartoon. Gameplay takes place in three different settings. The first one consists of Ren & Stimpy in space, where players control Stimpy who must guide the free-walking Ren from the start of the level to the finish by using objects such as springs and gophers who chew through the floor. Since there is a limited view of the level, it's a little hard to predict and plan for what comes up next, and isn't too fun. A simple but coherent horizontal space shooter also appears in these stages. The other two level types fare better: Sherwood Forest and the Old West. In Sherwood Forest levels, Ren must travel from start to finish avoiding or defeating wacky enemies with weapons while collecting money. The Old West features control of both characters one at a time who can be switched off by collecting a "Wanted" poster (Stimpy will spit to attack and Ren will deliver a short slap). The goal here is to collect money and complete the stage. While the controls are pretty responsive, the patterns of some enemy objects aren't too predictable nor give the player a smooth path usually. Level design is impressive at the surface, with both vertical and horizontal scrolling, yet can be a little too obtuse as to where the final goal is. Graphics and animation are both very good and a faithful representation of the cartoon roots. The humor of the show is conveyed fairly well, with minor characters and references from the show littered throughout. As a whole though, the different level types don't mesh too well, especially with the puzzle aspects of the space levels getting in the way.

Reflections: Naturally, I loved cartoons growing up (and still do), and I would always cherish the original Nick Toons that played on Sunday mornings in 1993: *Rugrats*, *Doug*, and *Ren & Stimpy*. They were all very unique, well-animated, and good fun. *Ren & Stimpy* was always the "older brother" of these cartoons though, as the content of the show pushed the PG-13 limits of raunchiness that would be appropriate for Nickelodeon. However, the show was very, very clever, and as the best cartoons usually are, enjoyable for both children and adults. Powdered! Toast! Maaaaaan!

Released also on the SNES, this title helped comprise a quartet of Ren & Stimpy SNES games that included three others: *Fire Dogs*, *Time Warp*, *and Veediots!* For more information on those, stay tuned for the upcoming SNES Guide Book that I'll probably never write. – PC

Renegade

Genre: Beat 'em Up
Release Date: Jan. 1988
Developer: Technōs Japan
Publisher: Taito
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⋆



This very early example of the beat 'em up genre consists of single-screen action where the player stars as Mr. K and must take out groups of similarly dressed thugs. Mr. K has a good variety of attacks from the start including kicks, punches, jump kicks, running attacks, knees after grabs, shoulder throws, and pin-down attacks. Players attack via a punch or kick, depending on where the player is facing. Pressing B will attack left, punching if facing a foe and kicking if facing away. Pressing A will attack right and functions in the opposite way. This unique control scheme helps the player to counter thugs surrounding them, and they do like to gang up. Action is fast-paced but enemies feel overpowering at times, and controls are a bit stiff. The player is given a health bar, but that may deplete quickly unless you're a hardened fighter. Thankfully, health is replenished in between the timed screens. Pick-ups are limited (and gotten in obtuse ways), but include burgers for more health, extra speed, and a super punch. There are only four levels, but the environments are varied, like the subway, wharf, and the final building maze. The different enemies are nice and include street gangs, motorcycle gangs, and women with loaded purses. The game is also pretty short once you get the hang of it. Overall though, the game is polished for an early beat 'em up, and there's some fun to be had, including a nice motorcycle battle level.

Reflections: *Renegade* was important in launching the beat 'em up genre and establishing the gameplay elements that would go on to be a part of just about every game in the genre to follow. It also was technically the first game in the Kunio-kun series of games (*Super Dodge Ball*, *River City Ransom*, etc.), if you care about that sort of thing. My friend Kevin had this game, and I remember always crushing the first few levels and then getting demolished by that big momma boss Kim who weighs 400 pounds. – PC

Rescue: The Embassy Mission

Genre: Action, Shooter
Release Date: Jan. 1990
Developer: Infogrames
Ported by: Kemco
Publisher: Kemco
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

The embassy has been taken over by terrorists, so a counter-terrorism commando team must storm the building, rescue the hostages, and neutralize the threat in four varied minigames. First, three snipers must be moved into mapped positions around the building while avoiding searchlights and gunfire in a side-scrolling game of stealthy movement, ducking, rolling, and hiding until reaching their position. Once they are safely in their designated spots, the game changes to a sniper stage where the object is to switch between shooters and take out enemy silhouettes that appear in the windows. At any time, the player can breach the embassy by rappelling a trooper down the building, but the controls make it easy to lose grip of the rope. The final section is a rudimentary first-person shooter where the player progresses through the rooms and and floors of the embassy, taking out remaining hostiles and saving hostages. The game ends once all terrorists are dead, all rescue team personnel have been killed, or if the time limit expires. Higher difficulties are on offer via a selection of three ranks (Lieutenant, Captain, Commander) and five missions, increasing the enemy count and reducing the time available. Multiple endings make repeated playthroughs appealing, and trying to shave seconds off of the game clear time is fun, but ultimately, there isn't any longevity to speak of. Still, the game is unique and absolutely worth a try.

Reflections: This was ported from the 1988 French computer game *Hostages*, where the terrorists are referred to as such and not as "political fanatics" as they are on the NES. Even on some of the harder difficulties, *Rescue: The Embassy Mission* can be completed in under 10 minutes, which is a shame because the presentation and overall experience are excellent. Clever touches are sprinkled throughout, from the opening cinematic that sets the story to the way the music fades when a team member is hiding from the searchlights - it's almost as if you're telling the TV to hush up - but the game is still over in the blink of an eye. Furthermore, the wall rappel sections almost spoil proceedings, as the controls aren't intuitive, but the rest of this title is quite engaging. – JE

Ring King

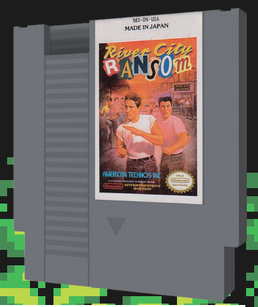
Genre: Sports
Release Date: Sept. 1987
Developer: Woodplace
Ported by: Sakata SAS
Publisher: Data East
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⋆

This boxing game is played from an angled overhead perspective, with the ability to freely move towards and away from your opponent in the ring, as well as circle around them. Various punches (jab, hook, uppercut) are thrown with the A button based upon where the boxers are positioned in the ring. The B button provides defense/dodging and works pretty well. The gameplay itself amounts to timing punches as opponents rush in, and knowing when to try for combinations versus trying to dodge. Also knowing when to conserve punches is important, as missing will lower the player's energy. There are four powerful and humorous "special punches" that can be activated somewhat randomly based upon the positions of the fighters and spacing, and these can floor a fighter regardless of their energy meter. It appears to be a button-mashing contest on the surface (and can turn out that way), but there is a small degree of strategy involved in the fisticuffs. However, the boxing is still difficult, especially when starting out with an underpowered fighter. Each boxer has "Power Points" in three categories: punching power, speed, and stamina. The player begins with nine points they can distribute but can upgrade their fighter by winning training sessions or fights. Getting there can be a slog, though. There are several nice modes here, including a tournament mode, the ability to watch a tournament, two-player simultaneous mode, and a rudimentary career (ranking mode). The graphics are cartoony and nice (although all boxers look similar), and the fighters are nicely animated. If you have the patience and the skill, then you might enjoy becoming a boxing king.

Reflections: I remember being better at this title than I am now, but then again I was probably "cheating" by using the turbo function on my NES Max controller to throw punches more quickly than my opponent. However, if you use a standard controller, that advantage flies out the window, and you have to rely more upon skill than performance-enhancing controllers. The people in whatever world *Ring King* exists apparently prefer the *Welcome Back Kotter* hairstyle. Fans of '70s sitcoms may have just chuckled at that line. – PC

River City Ransom

Genre: Beat 'em Up, RPG
Release Date: Jan. 1990
Developer: Technōs Japan
Publisher: American Technōs
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★★



It's up to Ryan and friend Alex to rescue Ryan's girlfriend in this groundbreaking beat 'em up-RPG hybrid. The game is nonlinear and is divided into more than a dozen areas that are connected left/right by walking or by traveling up into pathways to lead to another section. Players will take on thugs from several themed gangs, usually two at a time. They are not rollovers but will use intelligence in attacking, using distance, and even retreating at times. A wide variety of moves/attacks are available to the player: punches, kicks, jump kick, running attacks, picking up and using/throwing weapons (chain, pipe, garbage can, etc.), even picking up enemies and using them as a weapon or throwing them, bouncing off walls and jump kicking, and more. Blocking attacks is also possible with the A/B buttons, and success is based upon timing and attributes of the attacker/defender. Gameplay and controls are both very smooth, and the feedback from attacks and combat is satisfying. Nine skill attributes affect the player's fighting effectiveness and are upgradeable: Punch, Kick, Throwing, Agility, Defense, Strength, Will Power, Stamina, and Max Power (life bar length). How are these upgraded? Besides delivering humorous quips like "Barf!" via text when defeated, enemies will drop coins that can be collected and exchanged in nonfighting mall areas. By entering restaurants and ordering food, the player can replenish health while also upgrading one of the player's attributes (the more expensive food is usually more effective in boosting stats). Baked goods can be saved for eating later, shoes can increase agility, and books can be purchased to give the player one of six different attack abilities, such as a spinning jump kick and being able to jump on a fallen enemy. While players can travel and progress at their own pace, the game's structure requires grinding and defeating many enemies to upgrade sufficiently, or else the player will be very overpowered by stronger foes. This balance prolongs the deep experience and makes sure the player is prepared for taking on the next gang/boss that will be waiting in a yet to be conquered area. Nice music, very good graphics, fun sound effects, and the ability for a friend to jump in and play at any time complete an ingenious, marvelous gaming experience.

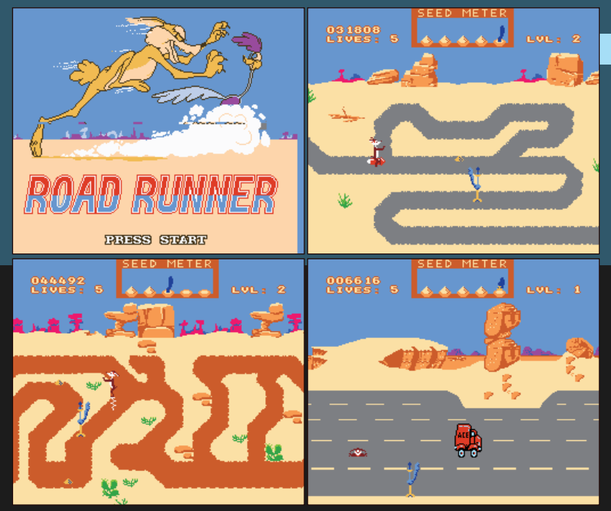
Reflections: Following on the heels of *Renegade* and *Super Dodge Ball*, *River City Ransom* combines the beat 'em up style of the former game with the more comical style/tone of the latter, and the result is something special for the Kunio-kun game series. In modern times, a beat 'em up-RPG game is fairly common, but to even think of it before it really existed and blend genres the way Technōs did was somewhat revolutionary. The game is also known for its humorous spa, where the player can freshen up to regain their health, with their cute pixel buttocks on display while toweling off. – PC

Road Runner

Genre: Action
Release Date: 1989
Developer: Atari Games
Ported by: Beam Software
Publisher: Tengen
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

Take control of the speedy bird from the classic Looney Tunes shorts and avoid Wile E. Coyote (Super Genius) and his ACME devices in this arcade port. You run to the left while dodging obstacles such as boulders, trucks, landmines, and cliffs, not to mention the coyote's clutches. On top of that, you must make sure your seed meter does not run out. Any missed pile of birdseed reduces the meter by one, and if it hits zero, you lose a life. The road you run on often turns into mazes or paths with dead ends - this is where the game begins to slip up. Furthermore, you don't stay centered on the screen; it only scrolls when you're far to the left, making it hard to see what's approaching. Eventually, the game becomes as much about memorization as quick reflexes; it's very easy to miss birdseed unless you are already familiar with the course, and likewise, getting caught by the coyote is a real frustration. Once you start to grasp the level layouts, the experience gets a bit more enjoyable. The soundtrack is comprised of classical tunes such as *The William Tell Overture*, and although the graphics are simple, the Road Runner and Wile E. Coyote resemble their animated counterparts. The game also captures the humor of Wile E.'s contraptions. From rocket skates to backpack helicopters, the devices are right out of the cartoon. These help him catch up to you, drop dynamite from above, and so on. Avoiding his attacks simply requires running in circles (if space is provided), and the coyote can be dispatched temporarily by leading him into an obstacle. At the end of every level, points and bonuses are tallied. If you run out of lives, a handy warp to the last completed level is available at the beginning of stage one. Overall, the game captures the spirit of the characters and is neat for fans of the classic shorts, but it really isn't that much fun to play.

Reflections: Growing up, I had a neighbor who owned this game, and as a huge fan of the cartoons, I was eager to try it. I ended up a disappointed kid but always went back to it because I really wanted to like it. After playing it a bunch recently, my opinion of the game is better, but it still has enough issues that keep me from suggesting it. Meep Meep. – IF



RoadBlasters

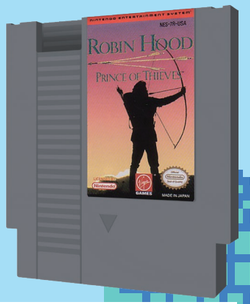
Genre: Action, Racing
Release Date: Jan. 1990
Developer: Atari Games
Ported by: Beam Software
Publisher: Mindscape
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

Race and blast enemies with your machine gun in your weaponized automobile in this fun Atari arcade port. It's rally style, where the object of each course is to simply reach the end before your fuel runs out (which acts as a timer). In your way are foes: cars, motorcycles, jeeps, etc., who will attack you to try and stop you with the single-hit crashes which cost valuable fuel. Power-ups are available (rapid fire, shield, cruise missile, nitro boost) and fuel orbs can be collected in the road to keep you going and blasting away. Controls are adapted well from the arcade game's steering wheel, which is helpful in weaving and whipping down the road at a quick pace. Graphics and sound are fine, and the decent challenge makes it worth playing through, even if the turrets that fire at you from the side of the road are a little bit unfair, and road hazards like mines can make it tough. Like the arcade, the player has the option of beginning the game at one of three different stages depending on the difficulty they want to start at: Bubble City, Forest Area, or Desert Region. Mileage may vary, but feel free to take a spin with this challenging but fun vehicular-combat title.

Reflections: *RoadBlasters* is one of those games that I always question why it wasn't more popular than it was. It may have gotten lost in the shuffle in the arcade, but for what it did, it did very well. Personally, I sort of shied away from it in the arcade and usually played one of the arcade machines near it, like *Rolling Thunder*, but I would still plunk a quarter in from time to time. I just wished as a kid I knew that you weren't supposed to shoot the fuel orbs but drive through and collect them. Hmmm, that may have influenced my staying away. – PC

Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: Nov. 1991
Developer: Sculptured Software
Publisher: Virgin Games
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★



A loose adaptation of the 1991 film starring Kevin Costner, this action-adventure follows the outlaw Robin Hood as he strives to free England from the oppressive rule of the Sheriff of Nottingham. The game features three different modes of play, the primary mode being an overhead perspective where the player guides Robin and his party on an adventure through various castles, dungeons, and forests, interacting with his environment through a list of actions brought up using the Start button – TALK, LOOK, TAKE, SEARCH, PLAYER. Such actions enable the player to speak to other characters, search for items, and equip new weapons and armor. This composes the majority of the game, where Robin will go on missions of sorts while fighting off soldiers and animals. The second mode is a side-scrolling affair in which the player faces off with an opponent in a one-on-one duel. In this mode, players must jump, crouch, and roll to avoid the enemy's attacks while trying to score their own with a sword. When one character's life meter has been depleted, the duel will end. A variation of this mode sees the player trying to outrun the Sheriff's men on horseback while attempting to jump over rocks in their path. The third mode is an overhead single screen full-scale melee in which Robin and his men must all defend themselves against multiple enemies at once. Players may switch off between the other members of the party, who all have their own hit points, assigned weapons, etc. These latter modes are by far the most challenging of the three, and with only three lives and no continues, most players will struggle mightily to master them. Most characters from the film are represented in the game, and while the graphics aren't particularly outstanding, each character does have their own portrait which is mostly accurate to the film – a nice touch for an ambitious but otherwise mediocre game.

Reflections: Despite being a huge fan of the movie when I was growing up, I found myself completely underwhelmed by this game. Offering three different modes is a nice concept, but the difficulty is so steep that I would have much rather had some extra lives or continues. The game does contain a hidden password system, which can be accessed by pressing a sequence of buttons on the start screen, but this is an unofficial feature and technically defined as a cheat. Nevertheless, it may be the only way for some players to reach the end of the game. – JP

RoboCop

Genre: Action
Release Date: Dec. 1989
Developer: Data East
Ported by: Sakata SAS
Publisher: Data East
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

In this side-scrolling game based on the 1987 film, players must guide Officer Alex Murphy (AKA: RoboCop) through six crime-ridden stages to clean up the streets, warehouses, and other areas of Old Detroit. Standing in his path is an army of dangerous thugs and killer dogs led by the devious Clarence Boddicker. To combat them, RoboCop has a variety of weapons at his disposal. His default attacks include a swift punch for close encounters and his trademark Auto-9 handgun for ranged attacks, which can be fired both forward and in the air. A rudimentary block is available via SELECT. Additional weapons available include a short range sub-machine gun and the infamous Cobra Rifle from the film that deals out heavy damage. These extra weapons have a limited amount of ammo, which can be increased if the same weapon is picked up repeatedly. RoboCop has two separate energy meters: one for health and one for his battery, which effectively acts as a time limit for each stage. If either one gets depleted the game will end, so the player must attempt to maintain both by grabbing power-ups scattered throughout each level. Between stages, players will be treated to stylized cutscenes inspired by the film, and will also take part in a bonus first-person shooting gallery with crosshairs cursor. The graphics are decent, and while the music is limited, it never serves as a distraction. The controls, however, are a mixed bag. Though RoboCop can shoot in almost any direction, he moves slowly and cannot jump. Stairs are quite possibly the biggest nuisance in the game, requiring the player to be in exactly the right spot to climb them. A somewhat flawed but overall enjoyable game.

Reflections: I'm a big fan of the movie and rented the NES game several times as a kid. I never made it very far back then, but finally managed to finish the game as an adult. Most of the difficulty comes from memorizing enemy placement and knowing how to react to them, but navigating the stairs is still a pain, often causing you to waste precious time while your battery meter inevitably ticks down. Despite that, the game is very playable with lots of nice touches for *RoboCop* fans. I'd buy *that* for a dollar! – JP

RoboCop 2

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release: Apr. 1991
Developer: Painting by Numbers, Ocean Software
Publisher: Data East
Players: 1–2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★

RoboCop returns in this sequel which sees the super human cyborg dealing with an outbreak of "Nuke," a new designer drug on the streets of Old Detroit. Loosely based on the second film in the franchise, the objective of the game is to destroy as much of the drug as possible across seven stages while arresting suspects. This is accomplished by simply running into oncoming enemies, rather than shooting them. An on-screen alarm flashes when an approaching enemy can be arrested. Containers of Nuke are marked with "N" and are strewn throughout each level, often requiring the player to jump across gaps to reach them, something RoboCop was unable to do in the previous game. However, the jumping mechanics are very slippery. Since the player must build up speed before jumping, the inertia causes RoboCop's cumbersome frame to slide uncontrollably after each jump, which can lead to unnecessary deaths. If the player fails to destroy at least two-thirds of the Nuke or arrest two-thirds of the suspects in each level, they are sent to a first-person shooting range to test their accuracy. If successful, the player may continue on to the next stage. Otherwise, they must repeat the previous stage until the minimum requirements are met. Unlike the previous game, RoboCop can only fire straight ahead, and his weaponry is limited to the standard Auto-9 and a punch that triggers only when enemies get too close. The music is unremarkable, and the graphics are far more embellished and cartoony than in the first game. One of the most disappointing sequels on the NES.

Reflections: I remember renting this title once and was far from impressed by it. The weapons are too limited and the jumping mechanics are just plain annoying. The fact that it's possible to fail the stage by simply not meeting the requirements is arguably the most egregious offense in this game. A poor adaptation completely overshadowed by its predecessor. – JP

RoboCop 3

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Aug. 1992
Developer: Probe Software
Publisher: Ocean Software
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★

This third installment of the series finds RoboCop seeking to protect the streets of Old Detroit from a gang called the Splatterpunks and a faction of ninja-cyborgs known as Otomo, manufactured by the Kanemitsu Corporation. The game spans five stages and plays very similarly to the second game, with RoboCop able to jump over gaps and other hazards such as acid. But unlike its predecessor, the jumping mechanics have been retooled and are now much more precise and not momentum based. Other features such as multi-directional firing have returned from the first game, along with weapon upgrades that provide RoboCop with rapid fire and spread-shot capabilities. He also comes equipped with an upgradeable missile weapon that the player can switch to by pressing Select. A new feature in the game is the inclusion of body-specific injury. As RoboCop takes damage, scrolling text near the top of the screen informs the player where he has sustained injury. This can be reversed by picking up energy pods, which recover a small portion of RoboCop's health, and by collecting repair icons which may be used in a small sequence after the level is completed. During this segment, players are given the option of repairing specific parts of RoboCop's body by clicking on them with a cursor. However, each repair icon only restores 10 percent of his functionality, so players must be very judicious in their repairs. Late in the game, RoboCop acquires a jetpack which he must use to fly through the level, picking up fuel icons along the way. It's not quite as good as the original, but solid on its own and still worth a play.

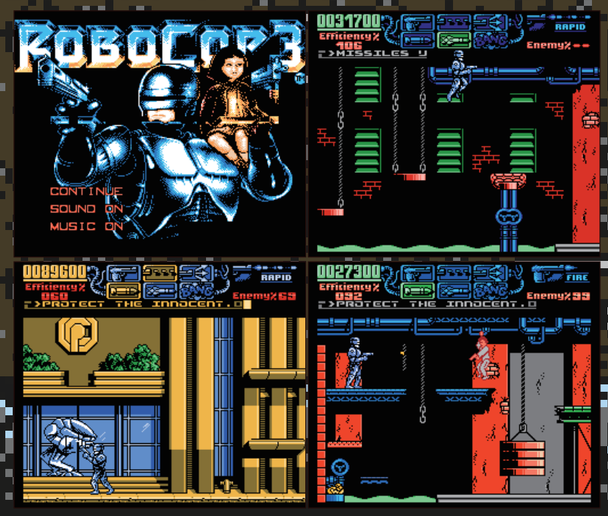
Reflections: I never bothered seeing the third film, nor did I bother playing the NES game it was based upon, but after the major disappointment of the second game, I must admit that I was pleasantly surprised by this one. It plays much better than *RoboCop 2* and comes much closer to being a very well-rounded platformer. The jumping is still a bit tricky at times, though, and the difficulty is perhaps a little too unforgiving, but nothing a truly determined gamer wouldn't be able to handle. – JP

Robodemons

Genre: Action, Shooter
Release Date: 1990
Developer: Color Dreams
Publisher: Color Dreams
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Rare
★

The player takes control of a boomerang-wielding warrior who must descend into seven levels of Hades (Hell) in order to stop King Kull. Each level begins with a short and poor horizontal shooter stage where players will fight off winged creatures, simply designed foes, and skulls, while collecting additional hearts. This is followed by a longer side-scrolling action section, which doesn't fare much better, with the player fending off more spooky creatures. The goal here is to find the key and face the "boss" monster at the end of the level before repeating the cycle. Controls are slippery and poor, the boomerang attack is largely ineffective in its power/movement (it travels up after going forward), and the enemies are unimaginative skeletons, demons, and indecipherable blobs. One-hit deaths can occur from falling into lava or giant teeth. The graphics are amateurish, from the under-defined enemies to the backgrounds, which are usually either minimal or an overblown mess. The only real highlight to the game are the digitized audio samples the game employs, especially the "Augh!" your character yells when he dies, although that may be the same sound players make after experiencing this game for a few minutes.

Reflections: At least we have the opposite of the Wisdom Tree Bible games with *Robodemons*. However, it's not nearly as playable or polished as those titles, which is saying quite a bit. One of the best moments you'll experience with this game is before the game starts, when the long, 100-word story paragraph will appear on the screen for approximately four seconds before disappearing. I did my best to speed-read through but could only get through about 20 percent of it. It's too bad I could not truly experience *Robodemons* with the rich background story the creators intended. – PC



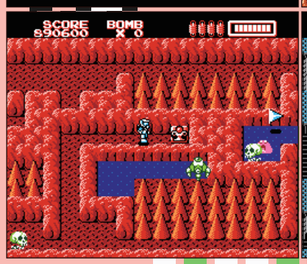
RoboWarrior

Genre: Action
Release Date: Dec. 1988
Developer: Hudson Soft
Publisher: Jaleco
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⋆

When humans colonized the artificial planet Altile, nobody foresaw the ensuing invasion by a hostile alien race! The people back on Earth respond by dispatching ZED, the legendary Z-Type Earth Defense cyborg, to defeat the evil Xantho Empire in this top-down action title. Armed with his trusty beam gun and a stockpile of bombs, Zed is tasked with infiltrating the alien threat and making his way to the stronghold of their insidious leader, Xur. ZED uses his explosives to blast through boulders, trees, and walls in order to progress, but watch out! Standing too close to a detonating bomb injures the valiant cyborg! There are a multitude of "Powers" and "Treasures" to discover, including Super Boots for covering ground faster and Barriers for temporary invincibility. Keys and Chalices are also required to proceed. Besides obtaining items by destroying foes and infrastructure, ZED can also find Medals scattered throughout the environments; these can be exchanged for items at Shops. Dictator Xur commands a horde of vile underlings, such as Deltoids and Lurchers, who are programmed to attack violently, but the cybernetic soldier can bolster his chances of survival by storing a reserve of his ever-draining energy in backup Life Pods. This title's graphics and sound are generally mediocre, yet the music is energetic and memorable, if only slightly repetitive. The gameplay is well designed and fluid, but carrying out this mission presents an overall difficulty that can be brutal at times. Much more fun would be had if the explosive protagonist couldn't blow himself up with his own bombs. Indeed, if he's too close to an explosion, ZED's dead.

Reflections: When I was around 12 years old, I made a regretful mistake. One of the more unsavory older kids in my neighborhood duped me into taking his copy of *RoboWarrior* in a trade. The negotiations were long and arduous, but I should have known better when he finally acquiesced and accepted my offer to trade my *Super Mario Bros.* cartridge, the game that literally everybody owned. I tried to like *RoboWarrior*, I really did, but it was unyieldingly difficult! Reflecting on it now, I think I may have been taking myself out with my own bombs on purpose. Apparently, I would have done anything to not play this aggravatingly tough game. Kaboom! – DM

Forget *Batman v Superman* or *Aliens vs Predator*. I'm waiting for *RoboCop vs RoboWarrior*. – PC



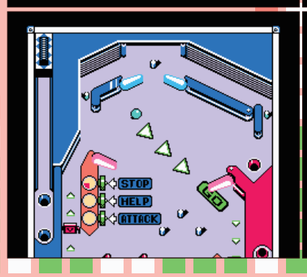
Rock 'n Ball

Genre: Pinball
Release Date: Jan. 1990
Developer: KID
Publisher: NTVIC
Players: 1-4 (2 simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⋆

This fun, colorful pinball game has many distinct modes. There's a standard-style pinball machine with a rock 'n roll theme that is the meat of the game with the common fixings like bumpers, a ramp, and drop targets. This is pretty fun, and the various items that can be collected via the top screen lotto target are interesting, granting effects ranging from a special bonus stage to making one's flippers temporarily invisible. A bagatelle-style pinball machine takes players back to the earliest days of pinball where points are earned for locking balls in the proper holes. It's a bit more addicting that it may appear, as figuring out just the right amount of power needed from the plunger to nail a certain target is quite rewarding. Lastly, there are two distinct types of simultaneous two-player machines: Sports and Battle. The whole game is a nicely designed package but these competitive machines are the standouts. The Sports machines utilize a single swinging flipper that can be positioned near the goal or center line while the Battle machines use standard pinball flippers that can also be positioned for attack or defense. The object in both modes is to get the ball into the opponent's outhole in a fast, fun mix of pinball and foosball.

Reflections: Pinball tables similar to the Battle tables do exist, minus such excellent features as exploding balls. Williams made a two-player table based on their popular *Joust* video game and Alvin G & Co. made a couple excellent ones in the early '90s with soccer and American football themes. None of these are easy to find, so if you spot one make sure to feed it some coins! – IF

The two-player mode is inventive, lots of fun, and really makes this game shine. Look at the guy on the cover art – he's having a ball! I would too if I was wearing tube socks like that. – PC



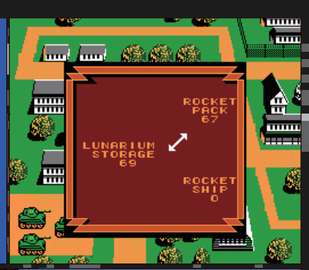
Rocket Ranger

Genre: Action, Strategy
Release Date: June 1990
Developer: Cinemaware
Ported by: Beam Software
Publisher: Kemco
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★

Prevent the Leutonian aliens from conquering the Earth in this strange hybrid of strategy and action. Players are presented with a map of the world, with several points of control that must be taken over from the enemy either by attacking them directly or by using one of five agents to infiltrate that area and set up a resistance via menu selection. It's simply random chance whether or not the agents are successful, and the only strategic element is to choose whether or not the cover is "high risk" or "low risk." When opportunities to attack the enemy directly are revealed, the player must load their jet-pack with fuel and fly off to face the enemy in one of a handful of underwhelming scenarios: a third-person shooter to knock out a blimp, a third-person shooter to knock out an enemy fleet of planes, a simple one-on-one punching match, or an embarrassingly simplistic single-screen shooter to knock out an enemy fortress, where the player slides left and right across the screen and shoots up. None of these action set pieces are even remotely fun or worth the time. Graphics are fairly impressive, and the story is written pretty well with some nice tongue-in-cheek humor, but overall, this is a title with a shiny premise but a half-baked result.

Reflections: The graphics are what this game is known for, especially on the computer where it won an award for the visuals. However, on the NES that's not enough to hold it together. While on the computer, the short bursts of action may have been sufficient, but on a home console they're joke worthy. This title is a lot more common than it has any right to be, and it of course has to be due to parents/kids who were tricked into thinking this was a *Rocketeer* game during the extremely short-lived 1930s rocket-packed hysteria that swept the nation.

I would also like to take this remaining space to note that this game, out of all the 750-plus in the NES library, was the one that I wanted to play and review the *least*. – PC



The Rocketeer

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: May 1991
Developer: Ironwind Software, Realtime Associates
Publisher: Bandai
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

As pilot Cliff Secord, you've found a rocket pack that is coveted by criminals and Nazis, but you can't let it fall into their hands. This game ably adapts the story and mise-en-scène of the 1991 film, featuring detailed cutscenes and a decent soundtrack. It's a platformer with vertical and horizontal scrolling and responsive controls. There are six chapters with large levels separated into locations such as an airfield, a club, streets, and others. While their designs appear complex, they are usually straightforward. A box in the upper left-hand corner indicates your strength (health), fuel, bullet count, and equipped weapon. SELECT cycles through your weapons, which share the same ammunition but increase consumption with weapon power. Fistfighting is free but weak, the pistol shoots a bullet, the rifle shoots further and costs two bullets, the Spray Gun shoot three bullets in a spread pattern, grenades cost five, and the bazooka is the most potent and far-reaching at 15. Your maximum capacity is 99 bullets, and you'll run out fast if you're not careful. Fortunately, enemies randomly drop ammunition, hearts (red ones restore some strength, and rarer purple hearts restore it fully), and rocket fuel. Most of the game entails jumping and shooting since the rocket pack needs fuel, which doesn't appear until flight is required, usually to reach upper platforms or attack airborne enemies. Sometimes, open doors spawn goons infinitely to provide fuel or items. Enemies include flying robots, minitanks, palette-swapped gangsters with different attack patterns, and others. There are four bosses: a gyrocopter, an armored observatory, the hulking Lothar, and Nazi conspirator Neville Sinclair. Most of these require different strategies to win. The game is challenging but passwords and unlimited continues help, making it enjoyable yet unremarkable.

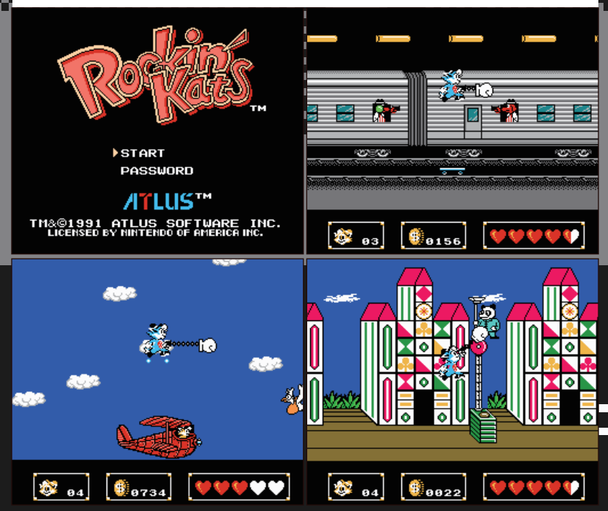
Reflections: When I was a kid, I saw *The Rocketeer* film and loved it. I distinctly remember the blimp scene and the soft little plot point that foils the villain. The movie wasn't that successful, but it seems like most who remember it enjoyed it. Its only crime was being released among other great films in the Summer of 1991. Unfortunately, I wasn't aware of the game at the time, but I would've wanted it. While playing it recently, I was watching a retro "commercial break" during one of Pat's charity NES Marathons. The moment after I finished the game, an NES Rocketeer ad appeared! Weird. – KN

Rockin' Kats

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Sept. 1991
Developer: Atlus
Publisher: Atlus
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★★

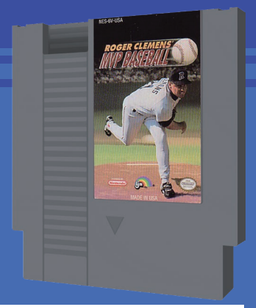
Jill the cat has been kidnapped by Mugsy the dog, and only the blue-haired feline Willy can save the day in this cute, unique, and very challenging title. Players must defeat five different levels selectable in any order via television channels. Each one has a theme, like the mean city streets or a rather unamusing theme park. They are well laid-out with nice graphics and attention to detail, each containing several segments, a mid boss, and a stage boss. Sometimes a quirk will be thrown into the mix for variety, like short areas aboard airplanes or on a skateboard. Willy will have to deal with numerous enemies out to stop him as he progresses, almost all of them amusingly costumed dogs. From gangsters to witches and flying aces, all of the enemy sprites are well done. Willy will battle against Mugsy's goons using his interesting punch-gun sidearm – a cartoon gloved hand that fires a certain distance before retracting back. This gun is capable of quite a bit more, however. Willy's jump height can be nearly doubled by firing at the ground while in the air. He can launch himself backwards by punching stationary objects, knocking enemies in his path, and in a pinch he can use it to grab falling items and some projectiles and throw them back at his assailants. Most importantly, Willy can use his glove to grab on to ledges, lampposts, and other objects, and then launch himself into a swinging circular motion. Enemies in his path will be harmed, but Willy can launch himself in many directions at a far greater distance than a jump. Many levels contain puzzling sections devoted to using this skill correctly. Two non-level channels can be used to aid Willy. One is a shop-at-home channel where power-ups can be purchased, such as a wrecking ball for the gun or hover boots for Willy. Another contains bonus games like roulette and target toss, where players can earn money or extra lives. There are a few issues, sadly. Bosses take an absolutely insane number of hits to defeat, even when Willy is powered up, many requiring 20 to 30 hits. Collision detection is a bit broad, with it being very easy to misjudge getting out of harm's way, causing the occasional cheap-feeling hit. Music is repetitive and the short loops aren't particularly catchy. These aren't game ruining issues though for a graphically awesome title with solid gameplay and a cute theme, so help Willy rescue his gal Jill in this TV adventure.

Reflections: This game, despite never owning it until I was in my late twenties, played a massive role in my NES gaming days. Released later in the NES lifespan, I rented this obsessively until it wasn't available at my local video rental shop anymore. I loved the extremely cartoony graphics and the odd way in which each stage was presented as a mini TV episode. Oddly, it was one of the few games I learned to beat with ease, sailing through it multiple times with each rental. Perhaps, unsurprisingly, I struggle to see the end today. – IF



Roger Clemens' MVP Baseball

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Oct. 1991
Developer: Sculptured Software
Publisher: LJN
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★



In this ambitious but poor baseball simulation, the player begins by selecting exhibition or season mode, and then selects one of 26 teams loosely based on Major League Baseball counterparts, with similar but different individual player names. The view in the game takes place from a third-person outfield view looking forward towards home plate, a decided difference from the usual overhead view from home plate out. The perspective changes dependent on what base the ball is near. This makes playing defense awkward not only because of the change in directional arrows for each base from each perspective, but also because the key used to show where players are on the base path faces the opposite, traditional direction, making it difficult to quickly discern what is going on with the runners and their advancement. The constantly changing perspective when you throw the ball from the outfield into the infield doesn't help either. Otherwise, fielding is okay, with fielders being able to move around alright, having some decent throwing power, and being able to dive for the ball. Hitting, however, is just about by chance, since the perspective doesn't give you any real time to react to the fast pitches, since the lag time for swinging after pushing the B button makes it nearly impossible to be able to tell where the ball is going and how quickly it's traveling to decide whether or not you should swing in the first place. The reverse perspective on offense also makes it awkward to run and return to bases, as players have to remember that the directions are reversed. It's nice to look at, including some close up shots for tags at bases, but it's terrible to play. A juiced-up Roger Clemens himself wouldn't be able to win one of these games.

Reflections: I tried giving this one a fair shake, even as an admitted Roger Clemens hater, but it's just not a playable baseball game. That (alleged) HGH and performance-enhancing drug abuser probably never even played the game that he ended up endorsing when he signed the contract with his (alleged) steroid-ridden gorilla hands. Throw at Mike Piazza's head, will ya Clemens!? Huh!? You see what you get! Retribution in an NES game guide! – PC

Rollerball

Genre: Pinball
Release Date: Feb. 1990
Developer: HAL Laboratory
Publisher: HAL America
Players: 1-4 (2 simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

In this pinball game, the theme is the NYC skyline, complete with the Empire State Building and the Statue of Liberty. Ball physics are very solid, as controlling the ball with the flippers is possible and at least a little realistic based upon the angles you employ. Not having the ability to "bump" the table is a minor disappointment. There is plenty to do here, with a lot of drop targets, kickbacks, several flippers, bumpers, a slot machine feature, multiball, etc. Since the vertical playfield extends to four different screens with different layouts, there's a lot to shoot for. It's a shame that the theme is pretty ho-hum, and the playfields themselves are visually boring with not much artwork, with a mundane blue and pink color scheme. An added bonus is a two-player versus mode where players compete on the same screen, side-by-side with their own flipper set, to try and prevent their total score from lowering to zero first. It's not a bad pinball game, and has a pretty good layout, but it seems like something extra is missing here, so it falls a bit flat.

Reflections: There's nothing worse than a pinball game with a boring theme. Seriously, the Empire State Building? Maybe that was a great theme in the 1930s, but come on now HAL, you have to come up with something with a little bit more pizzazz. How about a sports theme? How about an alien invasion? A *Rambo* rip-off? Anything! It's almost like they designed the entire playfield and then had to decide on a theme, but the artist they hired only knew how to draw New York building structures. – PC

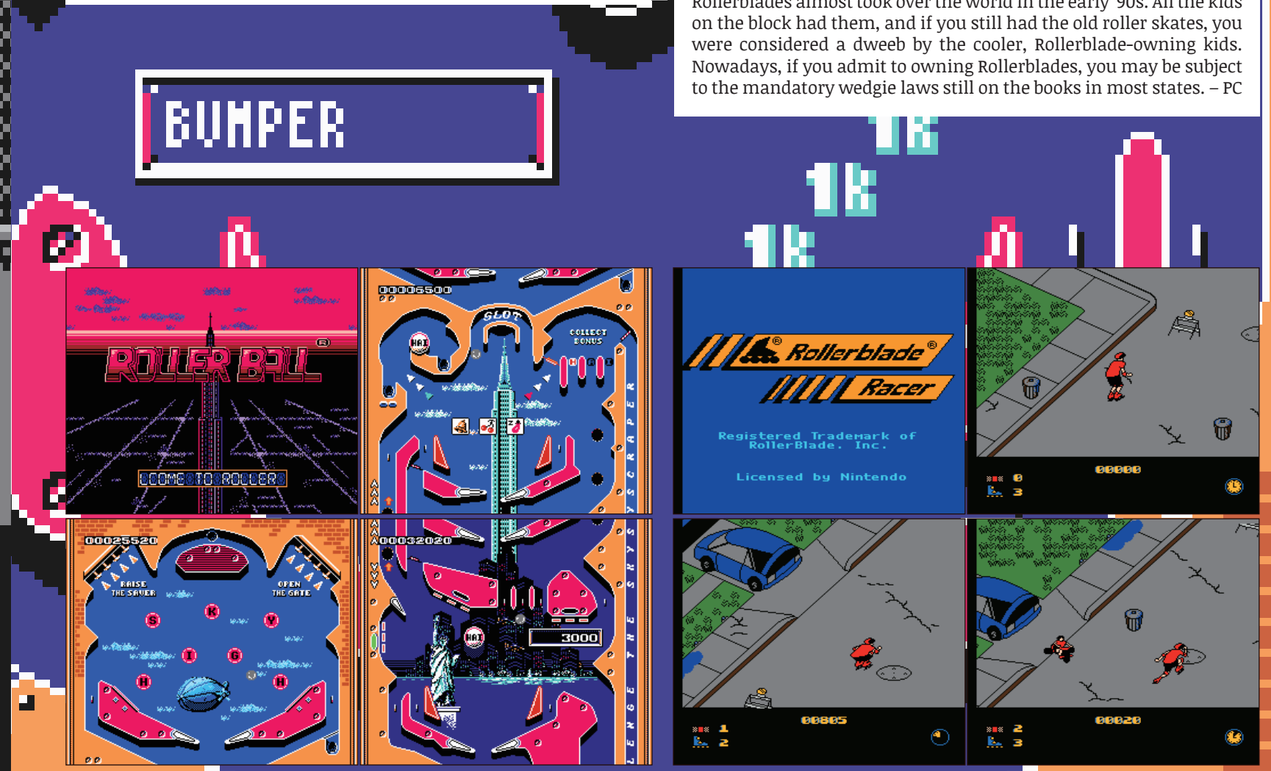
Rollerblade Racer

Genre: Racing, Action
Release Date: Feb. 1993
Developer: Radiance Software
Publisher: Hi Tech Expressions
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★

With this officially branded Rollerblade inline skating game, players are tasked to race through obstacle-filled streets and courses in the best time possible. The game plays from an isometric perspective and the player can jump and duck in addition to using the D-pad to accelerate, stop, and maneuver. The in-game text reads like an advertisement with the main character proudly boasting about his new blades and gear, and there are blading tips and courtesy suggestions about wrist guards peppered throughout. The game is absolutely nothing spectacular, but could have been average had every element not caused the player to slow down or fall. The courses look like zero thought had been put into them whatsoever, with each track being a mess of cracked pavement, construction zone signs, and the exact same model of car repeating. The main object of the game is to earn enough points to enter the tournament which is done by landing jumps... not just by jumping over obstacles, but any jump at all. Due to this design loophole, the game is actually not difficult, as all a player needs to do is skate at an even pace, jump a bunch, and avoid everything. The game isn't exactly painful, but the fact that it is sort of playable seems more by accident than design.

Reflections: Occasionally, I'll make the mistake of thinking advergames like this were a quaint thing of the past and then I remember the Burger King XBOX games and the Doritos titles. – IF

Rollerblades almost took over the world in the early '90s. All the kids on the block had them, and if you still had the old roller skates, you were considered a dweeb by the cooler, Rollerblade-owning kids. Nowadays, if you admit to owning Rollerblades, you may be subject to the mandatory wedgie laws still on the books in most states. – PC



RollerGames

Genre: Action, Beat 'em Up
Release Date: Sept. 1990
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Ultra Games
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

In this adaptation of the television roller derby show, players take control of skaters who must glide around and avoid pitfalls while beating up enemy skaters with punching, jump kick, and grabbing/throwing attacks. Gameplay is fluid, as movement is momentum based to somewhat accurately convey roller skating. Levels consist of sections that are mostly platforming with simple punching attacks until reaching a point where the screen will stop and the game become solely a beat 'em up affair. There are also auto-scrolling horizontal sections where the player must take out other skaters and bikers. With ramps and many jumps to make over gaps in the road, this is probably the highlight of the game. The graphics and music are both solid, but the drawback here is the difficulty, as navigating many of the traps/pitfalls successfully requires very precise movement/timing, and even a slight miscalculation/error can lead to death. Still, it's a technically sound game with some decent graphics and sounds, and may be worth a play or two until the difficulty overwhelms.

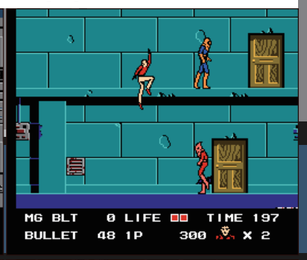
Reflections: I absolutely adored the *RollerGames* Saturday morning show, which was an hour long contest between a "bad" team and a "good" team (all represented in this game). The show was staged like pro wrestling and like that "sport," it was heavily storyline-based. It was popular for the year it was on, which is why there was an NES game which you are reading about now. There was also an arcade game, the gameplay which was based on the show competition, as well as a pretty good pinball game. It's too bad the producers went bankrupt and the show only lasted one season, as roller derby is pretty cool and unique. It's had somewhat of a resurgence with local, real roller derby leagues the past few years, which is nice to see. – PC

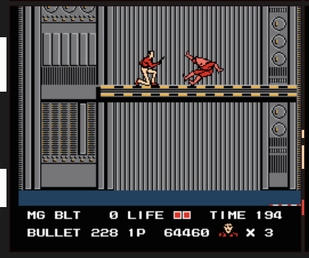
Rolling Thunder

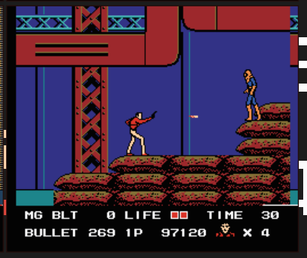
Genre: Run and Gun Shooter
Release Date: 1989
Developer: Namco
Ported by: Arc System Works
Publisher: Tengen
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★

As the red-shirted agent Albatross, players seek out to rescue female agent Leia Blitz in this Namco arcade port. Armed with a pistol, players must move swiftly left to right, ducking and jumping out of the way of enemies and their attacks while taking them out with pistol shots in timed stages. Most foes are hooded and color-coded to indicate their type. Some will attempt to walk into and punch the player, some will shoot, and some will throw projectiles. There are also some creatures to watch out for, like lava men, bats, and panthers. Enemies usually take one or two hits before dying, and the player has a similar life bar: a touch/punch will take off half of it, and a bullet or projectile will kill the player outright. Gameplay is fast, fluid, and requires razor-sharp reflexes to take out enemies coming simultaneously from left, right, and above. Players can usually jump up and down between two levels to get at and avoid enemies via using rails on the catwalk, which looks nice on screen due to the game's smooth animation. Doorways can also be ducked into to take a breather, gain more ammunition, or upgrade to a machine gun. Smooth controls allow the players to successfully pull off these quick and sometimes complicated sets of maneuvers with relative ease. True to its arcade roots, the challenge of the game errs on the side of very difficult, with many areas of the game resulting in near instant-death the first time they are encountered, due to the high level of skill and reflexes required to successfully fend off enemies that appear in an instant. Graphics, though toned down from the arcade version, are still nice, and the music stage theme is pleasing. While frustrating in places, it's a simple and intense game that can take on a mesmerizing appearance and pace in the hands of the right player.

Reflections: *Rolling Thunder* is my all-time favorite arcade game. The look, feel, and outstanding stage theme music all combine to make a very special gaming experience. It's definitely not for the faint of heart, though, as it can kick your ass with no reservation if you are not always on guard and quick to react. I plunked many a quarter into the game as a child, and being that there is little to no learning curve, I don't remember often even getting past the first stage. I'm a lot better now in my old age, but I cannot imagine even expert players being able to successfully complete this game on one life. If that exists, I'm sure it would be almost like watching a great action movie – seeing the flow of the gameplay and the player deftly dodging and taking out hooded enemies. Hmmm.... Hollywood, if you're listening (reading), the public is clamoring for a *Rolling Thunder* movie! And by public, I mean me and two dozen other people! – PC







Romance of the Three Kingdoms

Genre: Strategy
Release Date: Oct. 1989
Developer: Koei
Publisher: Koei
Players: 1-8
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

Expand the empire across ancient China to achieve total victory in this deep, turn-based, strategy game. Five scenarios and characters are available to play. Character stats for your leader are randomized via a dice roll which determines the initial play style. For example, having more charm means the player will be more successful negotiating with other leaders, whereas more power means the army will be more loyal to the cause. The map screen shows which leader owns what province; each one gets a turn in order to grow and expand. During the player's turn, a slew of options and information is available. It's important to keep an eye on loyalty – the higher the number, the more effective the people will be. Having enough food is the main way to achieve a good rapport with the people. Once loyalty is established, the player can then move on to training and recruiting armies, negotiating with other leaders, and even moving on to start a new province – though this one usually involves sending troops to war. Tactically, the combat shines. Played out on a grid, the player can attack and defend, and depending on which terrain the unit is on offers attack/defense bonuses. The aim is to take over the enemy castle for victory or to completely wipe out all units. Some battles can be huge, as the map is not limited to a single screen but a sprawling landscape. Players in the field have various options in attacking. Defeated enemy generals can surrender, allowing the player to choose to kill, recruit them, or let the coward run. Dividing troops is a good tactic to follow, as flanking can be the difference in a fight! Numbers on the battlefield dwindle to reflect losses, but there is also crude artwork that pops up to depict the battle. At a higher difficulty, the enemy onslaught can be merciless. The music fits perfectly. It's very somber and melancholic, but more regimented and foot-stomping during war sections. There is an element of choosing and awaiting the potential consequences, but the results don't seem as quickly crushing, resulting in a more forgiving but still very good strategy-sim experience.

Reflections: The fact that the series is still being made to this day (in Japan) is a testament to its overall popularity. It is a slight disservice to call it less involved than say *L'Empereur* or *Bandit Kings of Ancient China*, as it is still a pretty hefty beast. I just find this game to be more relaxed than some of its counterparts, with more room for error. I would consider this a good place to get into some Koei on the NES. The use of imagery really adds to the appeal, since there are other Koei games that have absolutely nothing mid game to look at. Graphics aren't everything, no, but when you have been staring at how Stephen Hawking sees *The Matrix* for 40 hours, the welcome image of two province leaders having afternoon tea is a treat for the eyeballs. – JE

Romance of the Three Kingdoms II

Genre: Strategy
Release Date: Sept. 1991
Developer: Koei
Publisher: Koei
Players: 1-12
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★★½

More feudal warmongering is afoot in this beefed-up, turn-based strategy sequel. The key to victory is to expand the empire across ancient China with a whole arsenal of methods to achieve it. Six scenarios are present which play along a timeline, each representing different challenges to overcome, character placement, and difficulty. The player chooses their character stats at random via dice roll, which affect gameplay, intelligence, and charm. These can be as advantageous as war ability, as diplomacy and negotiation with warring and adjacent provinces can open up new ways of playing. The player takes turns with the computer on the map screen to select which action best suits the provinces. Basic animations are shown depending on what movement the enemy makes. From this, the main meat of options come from the province screen. Listed is all the necessary information about each state owned, such as the amount of rice versus population, the number of soldiers garrisoned, and overall loyalty of the people. Everything from farming, army recruitment, war, and setting up new townships all need to be micromanaged. A noteworthy feature is being able to consult advisors before making a potentially huge decision or a massive blunder (the higher their intelligence stats, the more accurate their prediction). Diplomacy is an important option in that the player can coerce enemy generals to revolt against their leader and can even get them to switch sides. Another great feature is the ability to create unique custom characters whose stats can be tweaked and then placed in empty provinces for an extra challenge. Battles rage across a traditional grid format, each side taking turns in moving their troops and issuing orders, who can be split in order to flank advancing enemy generals. Victory occurs once the enemy has been wiped out or their castle has been defeated. The maps are of a good size, which condenses the battles down a touch, saving on unnecessary map trudging and increasing the amount of fight time. The sumptuous Eastern melodies accompanying the straightforward interface and devilishly addictive gameplay really make this sequel a shining light in NES strategy games.

Reflections: It's difficult to talk about the game without comparing it to the original. Simple additions, such as adding animation (even if it is underwhelmingly basic) really add to the presentation and break up the occasional monotony of staring at numbers for an eternity. The custom-character creation adds masses of replay appeal. The only downside to the game is that it isn't as accessible as the original, so it could put off some of the uninitiated from playing. If that's the case then play the first and enjoy that before returning to challenge this. There's plenty of extra content to explore here, but it all feels natural to the game, and not just cheap bells and whistles. – JE

Roundball: 2 on 2 Challenge

Genre: Sports
Release Date: May 1992
Developer: Park Place Productions
Publisher: Mindscape
Players: 1-4 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save, NES Four Score / Satellite compatibile
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★

This half-court basketball game consists of two-on-two or one-on-one action. Players choose various options such as difficulty, play length, primary control or control of teammate on offense, ease of stealing, ball out for winner or loser of point, and exhibition or tournament mode. There are two dozen players that may be selected, all with eight different offensive/defensive attributes, such as shooting ability, passing, stealing, rebounding, and more. Controls are nice and responsive. On offense, shooting is smooth and simple, and includes many different types that are possible including fadeaways, hook shots, and several types of layups and dunks. There are even four set plays that can be run. On defense, players can switch players with B, and steal, rebound, or block shots with A. Fouls such as blocking will be called, which can result in nice free throws from the perspective of the basket, and even three-point play attempts after a foul and made basket. Games can go on for a while though, even if set at the lowest time limit. Overall, it's a technically well-made game, with solid graphics and nice player animation, great voice samples, and gameplay that makes good basketball sense.

Reflections: It's very surprising how easy it is to block dunks and layups if you have a player with the proper skills, which makes playing defense fun. The voice that introduces the game is shocking the first time you hear it. "Roundball: 2 on 2 Challenge!" is yelled at you like it's saying "Welcome to NBA Jam!" That's funny to me since *NBA Jam* came out a year later, and was also a two-on-two basketball game. Hmmm, did Midway take some cues from this NES title for their hit arcade game?! Probably not, but I'm starting the rumors now! – PC

Rush'n Attack

Genre: Action
Release Date: Apr. 1987
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Konami
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★½

As a special forces soldier, players must fight through six levels of side-scrolling action in order to stop a nuclear warhead from being launched. Armed with a knife, players must fend off enemy soldiers who will march towards the player as well as jump-kicking soldiers and soldiers who will fire a pistol. One-hit deaths ensure that players stay nimble and alert at all times. On paper it's a simple premise, but what makes the game challenging and fun is the quick pace, as players will be constantly attacked on both sides, forcing the player to continue onward without a chance to really pause. However, the pacing and timing of the player is essential for success to prevent the player from being surrounded at the same time. Fortunately, controls are tight, allowing for quick movement and knifing attacks to the left and right – also while jumping in mid-air. The one downside is the use of UP to jump, which can be awkward when landing in mid-air accidentally on a ladder and the player sticking onto it, which can result in a cheap death. On each level, power-ups are available from defeated gold-wearing soldiers in the form of a three-shot rocket launcher, three grenades, limited invulnerability, and unlimited use of a pistol for a short amount of time. A two-player simultaneous mode is also on offer, one of the earliest on the NES. While the enemy bosses aren't too interesting overall (two of them are simply a line of soldiers coming at the player), the rest of the package presented here comes together to form a pretty fun, fast-paced arcade-style experience.

Reflections: I'm not sure how/why I decided to purchase this game as a child. Perhaps my father wanted to indoctrinate his son in fighting the evil red commies? I mean, it's fairly obvious that the game's name is supposed to be *Russian Attack*, and without much scrutiny you can make out details of the enemies and the levels to support the theory that you're fighting against the USSR. After all, they were seen as the biggest threat in the world at the time, and even tried to invade Colorado in 1984. Wait, what? *Red Dawn* isn't a documentary? – PC

Rygar

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: July 1987
Developer: Tecmo
Publisher: Tecmo
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★½

Rygar must free the land of Argool from evil forces in this action-adventure title. Players are armed with the Diskarmor, a short range weapon which operates somewhat like a yoyo to repel and destroy enemies. Some enemies can be jumped on, which will stun them for a few seconds, enabling an easy attack. It is satisfying to use the Diskarmor to deal with the mystical and uniquely designed enemies, many of which are monstrous lizard or dragon-type creatures. The game's world is fairly open-ended and consists of several horizontal and one vertical overhead area that are connected to each other via doorways. Players can traverse wherever they wish but can only reach and unlock certain areas via items gained from Indora gods, such as a pulley and grappling hook, who are reached after defeating enemy bosses. RPG-type elements also exist in the form of powering up the Diskarmor temporarily and increasing your overall health meter by collecting and activating capsules dropped by defeated enemies. The theme and concept of the game and its fantastical world is very fun, and the music and graphics are both above average and complement the experience. The difficulty curve is somewhat steep and the player's path obtuse, but unlimited continues will assist the player in exploring this well-thought-out if imperfect game.

Reflections: For the life of me, I still cannot figure out how exactly to activate the pulley to cross the ravine on the main overhead level. It seems that it either activates instantly, or takes 15 minutes of jockeying Rygar around the tree stump until it somehow works.

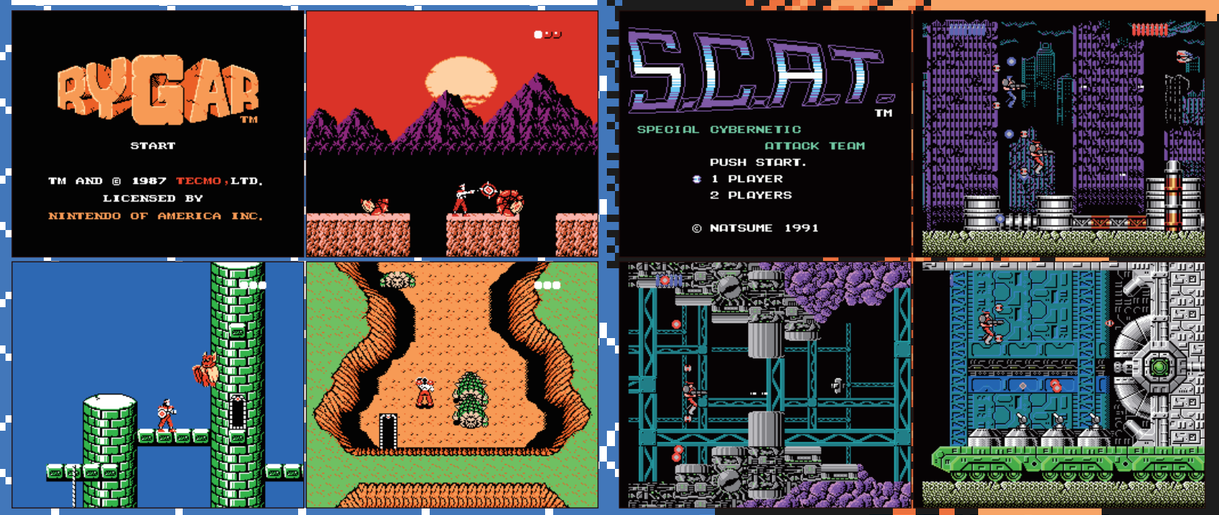
Rygar was one of the NES games I had as a child, and I am unsure what exactly drew me to the game. The exploration factor and semi-open world helped a lot probably, since I also enjoyed *The Legend of Zelda*. This game did not have a battery save, and takes a good couple of hours to play through if you're not an expert. I therefore place the blame mostly on this title for the terrible vision I contracted. I never even defeated the game as a child but reached the final boss, Ligar, many a time before giving up. I guess the unlimited continues allowed me to reach the final stage of the game, but is also responsible for me getting LASIK surgery on my eyes decades later. Tecmo: Your bill is in the mail. – PC

S.C.A.T.: Special Cybernetic Attack Team

Action in New York *(PAL)*
Genre: Shooter
Release Date: June 1990
Developer: Natsume
Publisher: Natsume
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★

This shooter has the player controlling a jetpack-equipped human against hordes of aliens invading Earth's cities. The player can freely face and shoot left or right while the levels often shift from horizontal to vertical scrolling, which creates a more frantic atmosphere than standard fixed-scrolling shooters. A range of weapon power-ups like wide-range waves and health-restoring orbs are available, but the real key is managing the two satellites that orbit each player and provide additional firepower. These normally spin freely but can be locked in place with the press of a button to provide fixed fire towards bosses or protect against approaching enemies in the rear. The sorely lacking ability to continuously face the direction one is firing would have really earned this a higher mark, as maneuvering against an oncoming wave of foes can be frustrating. Each level is designed quite well, with an excellent use of color that really makes one feel like they are in a cyberpunk future, and the soundtrack further helps sell the setting. With all of the great level design, it's a shame that most enemies are fairly uninspired turrets and floating robots lacking in uniqueness. It's a solid shooter with a great aesthetic that could have used a bit more attention on the control scheme.

Reflections: Action movie mania was obviously still in full swing when this was released in North America, as the characters' names were changed to Arnold and Sigourney. This has quite possibly the worst title for a video game, ever. – IF



Secret Scout in the Temple of Demise

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: 1991
Developer: Color Dreams
Publisher: Color Dreams
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Rare
★

The player is a boy scout exploring what appears to be a Mayan temple in this barely functioning and somewhat objectionable action game. Levels are designed with platforms and ladders, as well as rooms that can be entered to connect to each other. The gameplay consists of stumbling upon one or more stereotyped foes armed with knives, bats, guns, etc., who you must defeat with your kick or picked up items (TNT, boomerang, shield usable via SELECT) to unfreeze the screen and allow you to continue on to the next encounter. Some foes will drop replenishing hearts. The problems quickly hit you from every direction – floaty and slippery controls which makes it difficult for you to attack with your trusty kick, bad hit detection, and annoying music tracks that quickly loop. Platforming can be dastardly, especially with enemies that can easily knock you into pits to your death. The use of running while holding B is both a blessing and a curse. There are also areas where keys must be gained to open doors, torches to light dark areas, and a helpful map can be gained. Strangely, dying will start the player in the same room, but oftentimes on the opposite end, making it confusing for the player to track where they are when they continue. It's not entirely broken, but it's very boring to play, regardless of the the promising concept and interesting array of enemy characters.

Reflections: Color Dreams wasn't exactly going for political correctness here. If you happen to check out the well-drawn manual you'll find that almost every enemy character is either questionable or an outright ethnic stereotype. Still, this is the type of short story I might have written back in fourth grade English class – you can't totally fault a game that has a boy scout using brass knuckles, can you? – PC

Section Z

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: July 1987
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

In this horizontal shooter, the player takes control of an astronaut in a jetpack to take out an alien empire. What's unique about this "shmup" experience is that the player can turn and shoot left using the B button as well as turn and shoot right using the A button. This makes for a dynamic, fun shooter experience, with player being able to take out enemies on either side as they track across the screen. What's also unique is the structure of the game: shorter numeric based sections give the player a choice of where to proceed when they come to the end of them. Players may choose to go up or down, and the resulting path may either shoot the player forward in the game, or back to a previous section that they must complete again. This is original, but it is very frustrating to replay the same section multiple times. Gameplay is overall very smooth, with the exception of when there are many enemies/shots on the screen at the same time. When that happens, "NES slowdown" will occur. A few power-ups are available, in the form of speed, stronger weapons, and limited special weapons. Players will have to gain these to stand a chance as sections get more difficult. Solid music rounds out a somewhat different shooter experience.

Reflections: Completing *Section Z* is a very hard undertaking without creating a map to help get through the labyrinth of sections. Capcom actually included a visual map for this title in its first run. It is very sought after and tough to find, and has been counterfeited by nefarious sellers and passed off as an original to collectors. Do yourself a favor and print one for yourself from an online image if you truly want to get through this slog of a game. – PC

Seicross

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Oct. 1988
Developer: Nihon Bussan
Publisher: FCI
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⋆

Hop on a futuristic sled and head towards the enemy base in this side-scrolling action shooter. Players constantly move to the right on their vehicles and can shoot down or bump rival sleds into other obstacles. The player's energy acts as fuel and constantly ticks down, but can be restored through pick-ups lying about the level. Crashing into the scenery will lead to instant death regardless of energy level, so being wary of the dinosaur skeletons and satellites decorating the landscape is essential. Blue humans can be rescued along the way for points and end of level bonuses. Gameplay varies slightly with some levels focusing on navigation with lots of tough terrain, while others more prominently feature enemies. The end of certain levels have what can be called a mini-boss fight against dinosaur-headed tanks. After defeating them, in a last ditch attack, the tank will explode and launch its head at the player's sled. Surviving this sends the game into a loop with faster speed and more difficult obstacles and enemies. While soundly designed, the game itself lacks a real hook and other games with similar elements do so with greater charm.

Reflections: When I was about 10 years old, I admitted to a family friend's daughter that I could not swim. We were standing right near their pool and her response upon hearing this was to shove me in the deep end. I learned to swim pretty damn quickly. I also borrowed *Seicross* from her that day. *Seicross* is not the scarring part of that memory but is likely tainted all the same. – IF

Sesame Street: 1-2-3

Genre: Educational
Release Date: Jan. 1989
Developer: Rare
Publisher: Hi Tech Expressions
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⋆

Math and geometry star in this children's educational game. You choose from two game types: Astro-Grover or Ernie's Magic Shapes, each with its own title screen and about five mini-games. In Ernie's games he's a magician on stage with a colorful shape above him. He'll draw another from a magic hat when you press the D-pad. You must change that shape to match the one above, then press A or B. A rabbit behind the hat praises or shakes his head at you. Each game increases the difficulty by introducing colors and complex shapes with multiple pieces. In Grover's games you do arithmetic with aliens called Zips. Three games feature a spaceship hovering in the night sky over darkened houses, with a number scale and a cursor at the bottom of the screen. Zips are beamed into the sky and you count them on the scale, but you also add and subtract in harder mini-games. The moon frowns if you're wrong but smiles if you're right, and a section of housing is revealed. When they're all lit, Grover files in and dances. For Grover's other two mini-games he's at a command panel with three satellite dishes on the ground. You use the D-pad to move the satellite signals and select groups of Zips to match a digit on a spaceship nearby, which moves upwards if you're correct. In the last game you use the dishes to call in Zips to match the number, with each dish able to call a fixed number of Zips which you must add. The animations and visuals are surprisingly detailed and the music is pleasant. Being for kids, the controls and gameplay are slow, but not frustratingly so. It's probably not educationally effective today, but it's still a quality NES product.

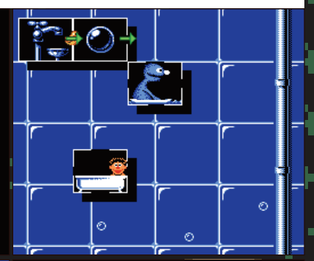
Reflections: I'm surprised with the look and feel of this game – it's much better than it has any right to be! It's not something I'll play ever again, but it's nice. Unfortunately, it was also released in a sort of multicart called *Sesame Street: A-B-C & 1-2-3*, which has another Sesame Street game on it, making this standalone cart useless. Or does it? Actually, *Sesame Street: 1-2-3* already is a combo pack by itself since both *Astro Grover* and *Ernie's Magic Shapes* were released for other platforms as standalone titles years before, like the Atari 8-bit computers. Rare added a lot of neat touches, but the NES version is still a faithful port, it would seem. Also, this game has the peculiar feature of programming the D-pad to move something but not in any particular direction, assuming that little kids can't use a D-pad properly. Is that really true? I beg to differ. – KN

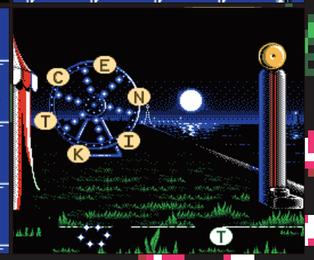
Sesame Street: A-B-C

Genre: Educational
Release Date: Sept. 1989
Developer: Rare
Publisher: Hi Tech Expressions
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⋆

This edutainment game teaches spelling and problem solving. There are two game types with different modes for each. In Letter Go Round, several letters ride on a Ferris wheel with another letter on the ground, and a high striker bell on the right. If you press A or B when a letter passes under the bottom, you can select it to match the letter on the ground. If you're right, the letter hits the high striker, or sad music plays if you're wrong. When you're correct thrice, the bell rings and Sesame Street characters dance. The other modes are variations on that, introducing lowercase letters and spelling. In one mode you finish words by filling in letters and there are multiple correct answers, yet the computer sometimes dismisses words like pop, bib, and cot. In the final mode you guess an unknown word. Ernie's Big Splash is less educational and more fun, while also challenging. Rubber Ducky and Ernie are in different black rectangles on screen with openings in different walls. The puzzle is to create a path that pumps Ducky to Ernie by building more rooms connecting them. With the D-pad you can cycle through the various room choices, which have green arrows indicating which way the water would flow, then press A or B. You can't design yourself into a corner, as you're not allowed to build rooms that won't flow. When you reach Ernie, the game shows Ducky going through all the rooms, with each room having its own short animation and music, forming a customized song. All three modes are the same but some add more pre-laid rooms with characters, like Bert, through which Ducky must pass. This game in particular might be fun for adults. Despite its young demographic, both games on the cart are notably well made.

Reflections: *Sesame Street: A-B-C* is actually a port of two games released for home computers. *Sesame Street Letter Go Round* was on the Atari 8-bit computers and *Ernie's Big Splash* was released for DOS PCs. The NES version is a big improvement on both of them, with new colors, designs, backgrounds, and more added by Rare, while also keeping the core gameplay the same. The nighttime scene in Letter Go Round, with the Ferris wheel lit in the darkness and a setting moon over the ocean, is original and strangely beautiful for a kids' educational game. Ernie's game is far more colorful than the DOS version, and the menu screen looks unnecessarily great with its animated title and various large sprites of Rubber Ducky floating by in costumes. This might not be a game for adults, but effort demonstrably went into this product. – KN





Sesame Street: A-B-C/1-2-3

Genre: Educational, Compilation
Release Date: Nov. 1991
Developer: Rare
Publisher: Hi Tech Expressions
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★⋆

This edutainment game teaches spelling, math, and problem-solving with four separate games, each with its own mini-games and modes. In Astro-Grover, you do arithmetic with aliens called Zips hovering in the night sky. You count them as they beam from their spaceship or group them with satellite beams, and add and subtract in harder mini-games. When you complete a set of questions correctly, Grover files in and dances. In Ernie's Magic Shapes, he's a magician on stage, and you change shapes in a magic hat to match one floating above him. Each game mode increases the difficulty by introducing colors and complex shapes with multiple pieces. A rabbit behind the hat praises you if you're right or shakes his head if you're not. Letter Go Round has several letters riding on a Ferris wheel with another letter on the ground. You must choose a letter on the wheel to match the one on the ground or finish a mystery word. If you're right, the letter hits the high striker, or sad music plays. When you're correct thrice, the bell rings and Sesame Street characters dance. Ernie's Big Splash is less educational and more fun. Rubber Ducky and Ernie are in different rooms on screen with openings in different walls. The puzzle is to create a pipeline pumping Ducky to Ernie by building rooms connecting them. When you reach Ernie, the game shows Ducky going through all the rooms with each room having its own short animation and music, forming a customized song. The animations and visuals are surprisingly detailed and the music is pleasant. Being for kids, the controls are simplified (the entire D-pad only has one function), and the gameplay is slow, but not frustratingly so. It's probably not educationally necessary, but it's a quality NES product.

Reflections: This is a compilation of two other NES games, *Sesame Street: A-B-C* and *Sesame Street: 1-2-3*, which are themselves compilations of a couple stand-alone home computer titles ported to the NES – Compilaception! For more in-depth reviews of those games, flip to their respective reviews in this book. *Sesame Street: A-B-C & 1-2-3* is more or less exactly the same as the other two, so if you're genuinely interested in having these games, this cart is the best way, depending on price and availability. – KN

Sesame Street: Big Bird's Hide & Speak

Genre: Educational
Release Date: Oct. 1990
Developer: Riedel Software Productions
Publisher: Hi Tech Expressions
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⋆

This is an educational game for small children and stars Big Bird. There are six games available from the start screen, which are all similar and take place outside the Sesame Street apartments. Muppet characters and/or letters appear in the four apartment windows, and Big Bird asks you to find something, like Bert or "Q." You move Little Bird (Big Bird's smaller friend) like a cursor to a window and press A or B. If you're right, Big Bird praises you. After each group of four windows, one of the characters will go to the courtyard next door and play for a few seconds, such as Grover on a pogo stick or Bert jumping rope. In the first and second games you're asked to find characters, the former with the windows always open and the latter with them closing, so you must remember the character locations. Games three and four are like the first ones except you find letters instead. In the fifth, Big Bird asks you to spell words from the letters, like "bed." In the final mode, he doesn't say what to spell and you finish as many groups of windows as you can within a time limit. But it's not stressful; there's no losing, you can try over and over, and all the games loop until you press start to exit to the menu. You'll want to stop, since the Little Bird cursor moves slowly and pressing any direction moves him clockwise, instead of particular directions. It's probably meant to simplify the D-pad for children, but it's frustrating. The graphics are serviceable and it looks like Sesame Street, but Big Bird's digitized voice is the standout feature. The samples are clear and there's a variety of them. Unfortunately, the game's too slow and simple for quality edutainment.

Reflections: I was about six years old the first time I played the NES. My memory of it is surprisingly clear: I was inching along in *Super Mario Bros.* and my brother told me I had to hold the D-pad down instead of tapping it repeatedly. That moment passed very quickly and I knew how to move soon after. Sesame Street's demographic was around age five in 1990, yet *Big Bird's Hide & Speak* is designed so that players don't need to know how to manipulate the D-pad in order to play. That underestimation was a huge mistake because it doesn't let you move Little Bird in a way that feels natural for a video game, making it a control scheme designed for no one. But at the time, who really knew how well kids could learn things like that? It's interesting to think now that there was a time when video game designers actually weren't sure if little kids could figure out a joypad, when today infants are given iPhones and tablets to play with. – KN

Sesame Street: Countdown

Genre: Educational, Platformer
Release Date: Feb. 1992
Developer: Riedel Software Productions
Publisher: Hi Tech Expressions
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★⋆

The player takes control of Count Von Count and walks/hops around various side-scrolling locations, like a town, forest, zoo, and even the moon! Players travel along seeking out number symbols or groups of objects that match the number selected for the player at the beginning of the level. At the start, players can select the ability to either walk or quickly hop around. Walking is for older/more advanced players, as the Count can platform and climb up parts of the stage to reach higher objects. When they get underneath a number or set of objects, A or B will jump and grab it. The sound samples from the Count are excellent, letting the player know what number of objects were selected and if they were correct or not when grabbing them in the levels. Grabbing nine of the wrong number will end the game. Balloons may be grabbed in parts of the level to engage mini-games to earn more numbers. At the end of the level, the Count will tell the player how many of the number were collected. Graphics are colorful and nice. The game is incredibly basic though, as the player identifies the actual number symbol more often than a grouping of objects that match the number. It may be too simple for some children, but at a certain age may prove useful for education.

Reflections: I'm not sure I'm the best person to comment on what qualifies for an educational game for small children, but this game is on shaky ground. There is no range of difficulty nor settings to allow a child to learn or develop to face harder difficulties, and there isn't enough of a context to the learning... it's simple matching that cannot be entertaining or fun to anyone older than three or four years old. It comes off more like a game that would be a part of a collection of learning games, not a solitary game itself. – PC

Shadow of the Ninja

Blue Shadow *(PAL)*
Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Dec. 1990
Developer: Natsume
Publisher: Natsume
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★

This fast-paced, extremely fluid side-scrolling ninja action game is set in modern times and allows for two players at once. Each of the two ninjas starts with a katana and can switch to a chain, knives, or stars based on power-ups. The katana and chain can be powered up three times each by collecting only those specific icons in a row. The game moves at a fairly blistering pace. Controls are fine, as the ninjas can grab most underhangs and flip up to reach higher platforms, which allows for simple but satisfying maneuverability. This can make the player truly feel like a ninja out for revenge. Level design is superb, and little effects like the rain and lightning make for a great looking title. Levels with rotating platforms and well-placed enemies let players show off their platforming skills with tricky jumps, requiring all the game-playing tools at their disposal (but therein lies the fun). The game is totally designed around the gameplay idea of making a big leap, hanging from a platform, flipping off, and taking out an enemy in just a few seconds – and it feels great. The music is wonderful, and while the main character sprites are on the simplistic side, the enemies, mostly mechs and robots, are actually well-detailed and very cool. Among a sea of ninja-themed games, this is one of the shining jewels.

Reflections: A game often need not do anything outside the box or break new ground for me to find it enjoyable. Great design and that intangible "feel" can make a seemingly average idea excellent in the hands of the right developer. This is the case here. Running, jumping, flipping, taking out all the bad guys, and learning the boss patterns just makes one feel like a ninja badass. – IF

Shadowgate

Genre: Adventure
Release Date: Dec. 1989
Developer: ICOM Simulations
Ported by: Kemco
Publisher: Kemco
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

Ported from the Macintosh to the NES, this first-person, point-and-click adventure title begins with you at the entrance of a sprawling castle, with your only directive being to defeat the evil Warlock Lord and stop him from taking over the world. The game throws you in without preamble, clicking your way through the castle by interacting with objects in each room via hand cursor, and discovering how using items in your inventory will interact with said objects. Commands include LOOK, OPEN, TAKE, CLOSE, USE, HIT, LEAVE, and SPEAK. The results of actions/use of items as well as the story is shown in text at the bottom of the screen. Items can be gained and saved for use to solve problems to move forward. Torches are very important, and act as a timer of sorts as they keep the game lit to play. Most items are fantastical in nature, such as gems, staves, and magic spheres, which can lead to confusion concerning their utility. The difficulty is rather unforgiving, mostly due to the trial and error approach to the game's puzzles. Sometimes, a solution can be logically thought out, such as using a torch to unfreeze a pool of ice just long enough to grab a magic sphere underneath the surface. But frequently, there's little clue as to what will kill you or not, such as climbing down a normal-looking ladder that suddenly drops you to your death. There are few half measures. While the base of the game is solid, and the fantasy world it builds is intriguing, the end result just grates a bit too much on the nerves to be consistently fun.

Reflections: Though the first ICOM game released on the NES, it was the third in a spiritual mid '80s trilogy, along with *Déjà Vu* and *Uninvited*. The PC version of *Shadowgate* had more refined gameplay and alternate paths to the goal when compared to these earlier titles. However, by the time this trilogy was ported to the NES, the lessons learned were disseminated to each game, and there is little basic difference in how the three are played. In fact, the one "innovation" this game has over the others is a system where you must find torches and keep them lit in order to see and stay alive, which adds an annoying time limit to the game's proceedings. *Shadowgate* in my mind is one of the quintessential "guidebook games." You either need a guide to beat the game, or the sheer tenacity and force of will to put up with dying over and over in increasingly unfair ways until you unlock the correct sequence of events to win. It's a pattern that was also followed by many early Sierra On-Line games, and not one that I find all that enjoyable. If you are one of these masochists that do, however, feel free to add another half point to the above score. – JD

Shatterhand

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Dec. 1991
Developer: Natsume
Publisher: Jaleco
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★⋆

In this action-platformer, players take control of a futuristic police officer with cybernetic arms used to punch and destroy enemies. Almost immediately, the high degree of polish jumps out: very nice animation and graphics, energetic music, nice level layouts and backgrounds, and pinpoint control. Players traverse levels bashing robots and soldiers with their fists, platforming, and even holding and jumping from fences to advance. Defeated enemies can drop coins that can be traded in on platforms throughout the levels to replenish health and to increase attack strength. Crates also exist, which when destroyed may contain a Greek symbol (α or β) that changes when punched and can be collected. Obtaining three of these symbols will call out one of several flying robotic assistants dependent upon the combination of symbols. These drones have their own life meter and will shadow the player and attack with either a short melee or longer range projectile attack dependent upon the type activated. Utilizing and memorizing the symbol patterns for calling up certain robots is a very fun and unique aspect of the gameplay, which can help out the player immensely in taking out tough enemies and bosses. If the player collects the same combination of three symbols again while still having that robot, the player will morph with the robot and have an altered, more powerful attack for a limited amount of time. While the degree of difficulty is high in certain areas, the amount of nice touches on display here and nice variety in the selectable levels, including spots with elevators and reverse-gravity, push this title above most others in the genre.

Reflections: Am I wrong in thinking that the hero from this game and the one from *Power Blade* are one and the same? Like on the weekends the futuristic police officer takes up boomerangs as a hobby?

Shatterhand somehow slipped through the cracks of the NES library, probably due to the fact that production numbers weren't too high. If this was a game produced by Capcom, it would be widely regarded as a system classic, but being a Jaleco release has relegated it to "hidden gem" status. Well, not so much anymore if you're reading this! – PC

Shingen the Ruler

Genre: Strategy
Release Date: June 1990
Developer: Another
Publisher: Hot-B
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★⋆

In this strategic simulator you're Takeda Shingen, a Japanese Lord seeking to conquer Japan. The game starts promptly without any setup, but it's plenty challenging since you're responsible for war and domestic administration. There's mining, alliances, health care, and more to manage. Your screen is split into sections, with two halves on top showing status and actions, and your assistant and his dialog sitting across the bottom. On the left are 10 primary stats, like LOY (loyalty), DST (disaster), $$ (money), and their numbers. Actions on the right are in selectable squares, like Nj (ninja), Dr (doctor), Fa (farm policy), etc. The abbreviations aren't intuitive, making the menu feel awkward. The assistant gives information and news on situations and prompts you for decisions. When it's time for battle, you select troops to deploy. There are cavalry, archers, riflemen, and others. The "HDQ" unit in particular has the Field General, and losing it means losing the battle. You can fight manually or automatically. The latter conveniently crunches out results in seconds, but the battles are enjoyable, with good controls. There's an overhead battlefield map, with men representing units. When you select troops with your cursor, a command menu appears. Each unit may move a limited amount per turn, dependent on terrain. If in range you can "rush" to attack enemies, often damaging both units. If the enemy is defeated, you'll receive experience, spoils, and men. Conquering a territory requires also winning a siege battle at the enemy castle. Likewise, if you lose against an invading army, you'll be driven back to your castle. If all your castles are lost, it's game over. There's only one scenario, no modes, and limited engagement with your individual territories and men. The visuals are colorful and drawn well, and the music is great yet strangely upbeat for subject matter like war and history. Then again, it *is* fun.

Reflections: Those familiar with the genre might notice this game's similarity to *Nobunaga's Ambition* in time period, actions, verbiage, battles, and more. *Shingen the Ruler* is simpler and more fun to play. Figuring out how to assemble your troops and keep them ready is a constant battle even before actual battle in *Nobunaga*, but in *Shingen* it's greatly simplified. The automatic battle option is fantastically useful if you enjoy the simulation aspects of the game more than the war part, or are simply tired of fighting after going through so many territories. Representation of the units is also much more literal, since you see them move around and shoot at one another, while *Nobunaga* is more abstract. Neither style is necessarily inferior; it depends on how much detail you'd prefer. Takeda Shingen was a contemporary of Oda Nobunaga, the sort-of "star" of *Nobunaga's Ambition*. Shingen was one of Nobunaga's rivals yet is a playable daimyo, among others, in the *Nobunaga's Ambition* series. – KN

Shinobi

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: 1989
Developer: Sega
Ported by: Tengen
Publisher: Tengen
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Common
★★★

A port of Sega's arcade game, players take control of ninja Joe Musashi who has to take down a criminal organization who have kidnapped children. Armed initially with a throwing star and punches/kicks when enemies are close, players will glide through levels taking out thugs and ninja baddies while rescuing hostage children. Players can usually jump up and down in between two horizontal planes to advance, which requires patience and care not to do so without taking damage on the health bar. Rescuing children will result in points, increasing health, giving Joe a gun to replace the throwing stars, and enabling the bonus stages at the end of some levels. These bonus stages are nifty first-person perspective ones that consist of the player having to throw stars at ninjas jumping at them. If players are successful, they will be rewarded with one of a handful of different "ninja magic" that can be activated on the next stage if players take out 10 enemies. These are mostly screen-clearing attacks but there's also one for invincibility and flying. Boss battles are fairly simple but are fun, ranging from taking on other ninjas to a chopper attack. The action itself is simple as players jump and attack often. However, there are many spots where cheap deaths can occur, since enemies marching forward can constantly careen into the player, since there's no limited invincibility after being hit. Besides the impressive bonus stages, presentation is average at best, with dull graphics and sounds, which fails to live up to its arcade roots. However, there's some ninja fun to be had here, even if the entire experience isn't totally thrilling.

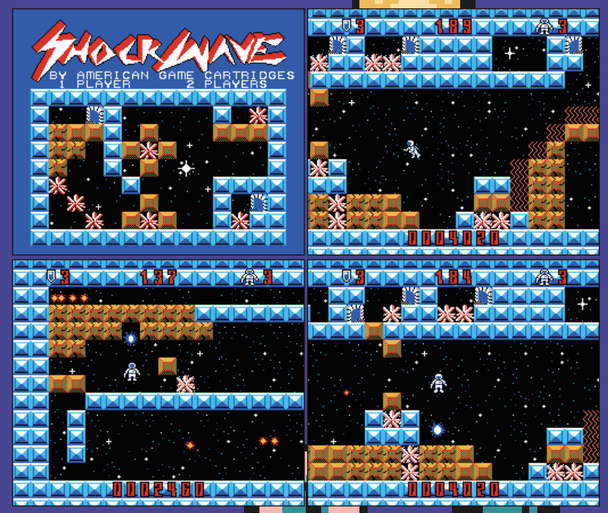
Reflections: I'm not entirely sure why this port's graphics are so average, but I'm guessing it's because the scale was kept just about the same with the arcade game, so the detail was hard to accomplish on such large sprites (Joe doesn't seem to have any facial features). *Shinobi* was part of Sega's glorious mid '80s arcade run alongside *Space Harrier* and *Out Run*. Unfortunately, we only got a port of one of the trilogy on the NES. *Out Run* never hit the Famicom, but *Space Harrier* did. And while *Shinobi* was only serviceable as a port, *Space Harrier* fared much better, emulating the 3D scaling effects pretty well. Check out the internet to see some gameplay footage of that when you get a chance, but only after you finish reading the rest of this handy guide. – PC

Shockwave

Genre: Action, Puzzle
Release Date: 1990
Developer: American Game Cartridges
Publisher: American Game Cartridges
Players: 1-2
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★

Players must collect all the crystals on an overhead grid screen to move onto the next in this timed action-puzzle game. Donning an interdimensional suit, players will glide around the screen in directions while avoiding ricocheting fireballs. Using a "shock wave pistol," players can destroy brittle rocks to gain passage to gems behind them, however getting past the solid ones is a little more troublesome. If blocks are adjacent to each other, shooting the first block in a group will send a shockwave both vertically and horizontally, pushing any singular blocks at the edges away until they hit another rock or object. This is what comprises the "puzzle" aspect of the game, as players must plan and carefully clear away paths of blocks to get to other crystals, teleportation doors, and around force fields. Likewise, they must move blocks (sometimes all the way across the board) in order to form adjacent blocks to then move another block via shock wave, since singular solid blocks cannot be moved. It isn't too intuitive, and will require lots of trial and error, with it being very easy to become stuck by having moved blocks the wrong way. If this happens, players may restart the level (which takes away a life). There's also a password system and continues to help you get through the 50 supplied levels, but I imagine that only the most hardcore puzzle fan looking for something very different will ever care to try.

Reflections: The story of the game, as told on the back of the box, is a borderline insane tale involving aliens named the Tarians, Rastons, a dimensional field generator, and an interdimensional suit. Apparently, you have to seal an interdimensional rift by collecting all the crystals and, and... alright, this is too much even after seeing all the wacky plots of all the other NES games up to this point. Let's just pretend it's Neil Armstrong in that spacesuit having a peyote trip. – PC



Shooting Range

Genre: Shooting Gallery
Release Date: June 1989
Developer: TOSE
Publisher: Bandai
Players: 1-4
Special Features: Zapper (required)
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⋆

This Zapper title offers two light gun experiences: Normal Game and Party Game. In Normal Game, you face three scenes of characters carrying targets. They're all fitting to their setting, such as sheriffs in the Western, mummies in the ghosthouse, and Xenomorph-like aliens in space. A bonus level features saloon bottles that you shoot for extra points when they're lit up. The goal of each scene is to hit a number of targets before time runs out or you miss too many shots, draining your energy meter in the lower left. Run out of either energy or time, and the round is over, forcing you to try again. To help, special items can be shot for more energy, time, and points. There are three difficulty levels, but even the highest difficulty is fairly easy, so expert gunslingers may become bored quickly. What makes this mode interesting is that you still have to use the controller, pressing Right and Left to pan across the entire scene, which adds a layer to the experience. In Party Game, the scores of you and up to three other players are tracked in an arcade shooting range where targets come up from the bottom. This mode is purely about speed and accuracy to get the most points. Once time is up, your total is tallied, and the game judges you based on your skills. Party Game offers more of a challenge than Normal Game, but if you're not competing against other people, it feels rather superfluous. This title is okay if you're new to the Zapper or have some friends over, but you'll likely lose interest before long.

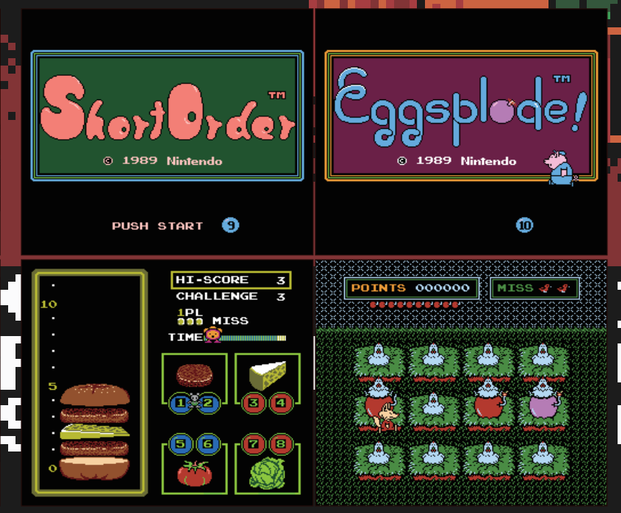
Reflections: Growing up, the only Zapper game I owned was *Duck Hunt* in the ubiquitous *Super Mario Bros./Duck Hunt* dual cartridge, so I love to play other ones! Despite my issues with this game, there are still aspects I enjoy. I like that Normal Game plays out like a story mode having multiple stages with their own distinct look, characters, and music. There's also a boss at the end of the third level, adding a sense of accomplishment. Throughout the stages, however, I often find myself sitting around waiting for targets to appear as I scan the scene, which kills the excitement. Nonetheless, I have a favorite level: the ghosthouse. All the creatures are cute and have funny reactions when their target is shot. So, who's up to confuse Frankenstein monsters and trip mummies with me? – KY

Short Order/Eggsplode!

Genre: Action, Compilation
Release Date: Dec. 1989
Developer: TOSE
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: *Short Order*: 1-2 (simultaneous), *Eggsplode!*: 1-5
Special Features: Power Pad (required)
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

This Power Pad combo cart consists of two games. In *Short Order*, you're a cook tasked to make hamburgers by replicating the customer's proper order of ingredients when adding the meat, lettuce, tomato, and cheese. Players will stomp on the pad to reflect the pattern of burger ingredients, as each one corresponds to a specific spot. It's a game of memory by repeating sights and sounds via the Power Pad, as each burger order gets longer and more complicated with more ingredients added. Simple but harmless fun. *Eggsplode!* has the player use the Power Pad to disarm bombs on single screen stages. Foxes will run out in a hen house with 16 hens and plant bombs underneath chickens. The players can defuse them by stepping on the appropriate corresponding pad spot before it explodes. It starts out slowly but eventually gets out of control as the foxes place not just bombs but also eggs which the player must avoid stomping on, or else they lose a life. This is tough given the controller and rapid foot placement/stepping needed. It's more manic than *Short Order*, and a bit more fun.

Reflections: Let's face it, with only six available titles you could buy for the Power Pad accessory – there's not a lot of games to choose from. You could do a lot worse than *Short Order/Eggsplode!*, but not much better. It's a fine little foot-stomping experience before your Power Pad continues to collect dust again. – PC



Side Pocket

Genre: Billiards
Release Date: June 1987
Developer: Data East
Publisher: Data East
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

This is a port of the very good arcade billiards game. In the arcade pocket game mode, the object is to sink the six numbered pool balls with a limited number of shots, while also achieving a minimum score. More points are achieved for sinking the numbered balls in the proper order, and consecutively. Trick shots are also randomly available at intervals during the round for more chances and points, by sinking balls into the pockets lit up by a star. There's also the random "super ball," which if hit, will put enough energy into the cue ball to smash and travel around the table for a while. At the end of the round when all balls are sunk, the player has the chance for a bonus trick shot before attempting the next, more difficult round. The actual pool gameplay here is excellent, offering the player not just the power of the shot via meter, but also the opportunity to english (put a spin on the ball), draw, and follow just like on a real pool table. This allows strategic shots and planning one or two shots ahead. The physics of the ball angles and momentum are spot-on, and allow for fun, even deep pool games. The added two-player 9-ball game and a practice mode are a nice touch as well.

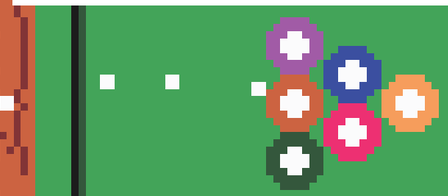
Reflections: If you want to experience virtual billiards, you could do a lot worse than the first popular billiards game here. The single-player experience is in fact limited, but for what it does, it does it well. My friend AJ is not a big gamer, but every single time I bring up the NES, he always says, "Hey, you remember that pool game?" After I tell him that it's *Side Pocket*, he usually responds, "Oh yeah, that's the one!" Every. Single. Time. I should add that my friend AJ is a bit of a sociopath. – PC

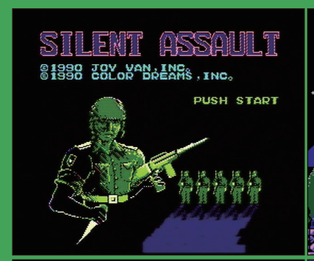
Silent Assault

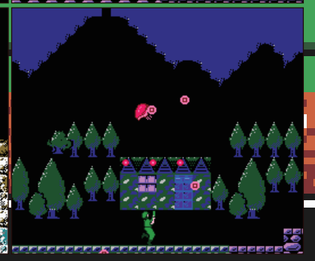
Genre: Run and Gun Shooter
Release Date: 1990
Developer: Joy Van
Publisher: Color Dreams
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★

In this strange run and gun shooter, the player's soldier begins by hang-gliding (?!) into enemy territory and must take out enemy foes using a gun. Players can also perform a rolling jump to traverse and avoid enemies and their firepower. Power-up items include a more powerful gun, spread shot, limited invincibility, health-replenishing hearts, and grenades (thrown via SELECT). Everything on display is simple and amateurish, from the garish graphics to the laughably easy level-ending bosses. Enemy characters range from generic soldiers to whacked-out choices like slugs and what look to be flying beetles. Glitches and bad programming are visible often, from the fairly innocuous ability to sometimes jump onto background objects, to encountering level areas where the player can get stuck and be unable to continue, or end up falling through the level and walking through the bottom of the screen. Recommended only if you're looking to laugh and/or scratch your head.

Reflections: Okay, I know that they were trying to ape *Contra* a bit here, with the spread gun power-up and the rolling jump, but come on, someone over at Joy Van studios should have stopped this project before it got "deep" into development. Why didn't the boss say, "Hey Bob, you think you could be a little less ambitious here? How about programming a nice *Pac-Man* clone?" Or maybe the Joy Van and/or Color Dreams CEO just wanted a game thrown onto store shelves that could fool people into thinking it was *Rush'n Attack* but with a psychedelic color palette. – PC







Silent Service

Genre: Simulation
Release Date: Dec. 1989
Developer: MicroProse Software
Ported by: Rare
Publisher: Ultra Games
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★★

Patrol and take out Japanese convoys with this deep World War II submarine simulation. Many options are available to the player before beginning any mission to customize the combat difficulty, including level of visibility, prevalence of "dud" torpedoes, how close convoys are at the start, and more. There are target practice missions, convoy missions that put you right into the action, and "War Patrols," which has the player select a path in an overhead Pacific Theater view, and then is alerted if coming upon a convoy to dive into the action and then eventually return to a base. On the submarine, many different options are available on the bridge which is navigated via point-and-click interface. The map view lets the players zoom out and in while being able to navigate the ship's rudder (turning), alter the speed, lowering/raising the periscope, and raising or diving the sub. The periscope allows a surface view to see ships and identify them, and also allows firing on ships. When surfaced, the player can fire both torpedoes and the deck gun, but when submerged only torpedoes are available. Using the second controller allows more options, like the helpful ability to view and aim with the periscope without turning the ship. When fired upon by destroyers, players can submerge, but under water the submarine travels with less speed, and is then susceptible to depth charge attacks if destroyers get close. Other options inside the sub include looking at the gauges which have information not available elsewhere on the ship (like torpedo readiness and battery level for underwater maneuvering). If the sub's been hit, there's also a damage report screen to see what part of the ship's in trouble. Level of enjoyment will be based on your love of submarine simulations and a handling of the learning curve, but the combat is very deep and satisfying in the lengths it goes to make you feel like you're really in a submarine, with nice visuals and even the ping of sonar to constantly remind you.

Reflections: *Silent Service* was a huge game on computers in the 1980s – one in the strong line of MicroProse simulations that they cranked out year after year. Obviously, playing it on the PC is best with a keyboard and the ability to save your records, but this port isn't too shabby. This title must have been popular amongst the older NES players at the time, since I never knew any kid who owned it, yet it's one of the most common third party titles on the NES alongside *Bases Loaded*. – PC

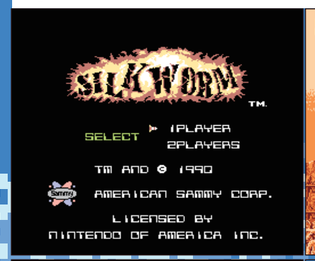
Silkworm

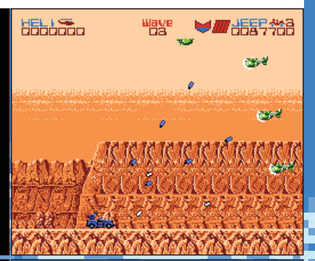
Genre: Shooter
Release Date: June 1990
Developer: Tecmo
Publisher: American Sammy
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★½

This unique horizontal shooter features the option of playing as a jeep or helicopter (or both in two-player mode) out to stop supercomputer MH-C2 that has taken over weapons of the world. As the jeep, players start with a single shot cannon which can be angled between 180 degrees, forward to up, by pressing up and down on the D-pad. A double split-shot power-up can be obtained by destroying a segmented helicopter, and a second will make the vehicle turbo speed. The jeep can also jump. The helicopter starts with a straight shot and a second shot angled down, and both shots can be angled further downward with the A button. The power-ups for the copter are a double straight shot and turbo speed as well. The enemies are varied and include several types of attack choppers, tanks, missile silos, and other ground targets that fire. Some fly in a set pattern, but some will fly at the player, and will fire directly at them as well, so being nimble is key to surviving, since there's no health bar. Players can gain a respite by getting a temporary shield power-up that's released from destroyed land mines. The difficulty makes it so that you have to be alert and ready at all times, as there's not much room to breathe, especially for the challenging boss battles. Being that there are two vehicles to choose from, this allows for some replayability, as there are pros and cons to each vehicle, and it's interesting discovering the differences and just how different a game it is when using each. The two-player simultaneous mode is outstanding and really showcases the aforementioned differences, as there are enemy types that will be easier to take out for both jeep and helicopter. A good amount of thought went into this highly enjoyable shooter.

Reflections: Not to be confused with the famous Amiga silkworm simulator of the same name.

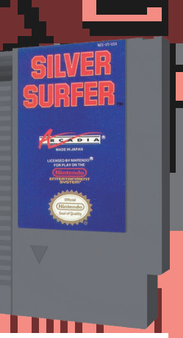
The simple backstory of the game is straight out of the film *The Terminator*. I remember playing a *Silkworm* arcade cabinet at the same Mom & Pop VHS store where I used to rent *Super Mario Bros. 2*. If I had known it existed on the NES, I probably would have went for it. There's not another shooter like it for the time, and for that reason alone it's well worth your time. It's a shame there was never a true follow up, as a 16-bit version could have been even more special. – PC





Silver Surfer

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Nov. 1990
Developer: Software Creations
Publisher: Arcadia Systems
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★⋆



In this hybrid horizontal/vertical shooter, the player takes control of superhero Silver Surfer, who must retrieve pieces of a cosmic device for his master, Galactus. There are five levels to choose from at the start, which all consist of one vertical shooter stage, one horizontal, and a shorter final horizontal level culminating in a boss fight. Gameplay is tough, as the player starts out with a very weak shot, which will take multiple hits from to even destroy simple enemies. It is key that the player pick up the "F" icons to increase the rate of fire and shot power, "S" icons to increase movement speed, and the silver orbs. The orbs give the player an attached drone that fires as well, and it can be switched to fire either forwards, backwards, or downwards (sideways in vertical levels) with the B button. If a second orb is collected, on the overhead levels players will have a second drone on the other side to help them. "B" icons can be collected to clear the screen handily with the Select button. If powered up at least somewhat, players have a good chance to survive in the levels. Staying back is key for the most part, since enemies usually arrive from the front and swirl around quickly. Firing constantly is the only way to keep up with the frenzy. Many stage hazards exist to watch out for as well, and players have to be mindful not to knock into obstacles, especially in the overhead levels where the hit box of Silver Surfer's board is very large. Power-ups are lost from the single hit deaths, and it's difficult (but not impossible) to regain them to have a chance again. Graphics here are pretty solid, and the level and enemy design inventive and matching each other, with even some humorous elements tossed in at places. The boss battles, strangely, aren't nearly as difficult as the levels that precede them. The soundtrack is very good, with some rocking tracks to keep you grooving while you're desperately shooting and trying to survive. There's a pretty good shooter here, but it's hidden beneath some serious difficulty. Casual gamers: Proceed with caution.

Reflections: More seasoned shooter fans will wring far more enjoyment out this title than most. And for those that somehow think that this isn't challenging enough, there's somehow an EXPERT MODE via password that you're given if you beat the game. What happens then? Do they send someone over to your house to beat you with a bat while you play? Question: Why is Silver Surfer so weak? He's arguably the most powerful superhero in all of comics, and here he's slumping on his board and crying from single hits from lizard men. There's another sad sight. On the final stage there's a green slug enemy who looks so sad that he could be depressed. I'm wondering if he was conscripted to fight against the powerful Silver Surfer, knowing full well it was a suicide mission. Did the green slug have friends? A wife? Green slug children at home? The thought saddens me. Godspeed, poor little slug.– PC

The Simpsons: Bart vs. the Space Mutants

Genre: Platformer
Release Date: Feb. 1991
Developer: Imagineering
Publisher: Acclaim Entertainment
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★⋆

In this first video game based upon the hit animated show, Bart Simpson must stop aliens from taking over by collecting or destroying a specific number of items in each of five levels, respectively: purple objects in Springfield, hats in a mall, balloons at an amusement park, exit signs at a museum, and nuclear rods at a power plant. Bart has a set time limit to accomplish this and must avoid aliens and hazards along the way. The first level is the most complicated in design and somewhat obtuse. Bart can use spray paint to change purple items red, but there are others that can only be eliminated by using collected coins to purchase items and use them, like bottle rockets to close purple curtains or a cherry bomb to scare a purple bird away. There's a lot to do, which wouldn't be an issue if not for two things: a time limit and the fact that Bart loses a life on two hits. The following levels are a bit more straightforward in accomplishing the objectives, but the difficulty is still high, due to the aforementioned time limits, precarious platforming, and awkward controls. To make Bart jump farther, players must use A to jump and then B quickly after. There's a run function as well, but that operates strangely too: jumping with A and then holding it while maneuvering. Bart can use SELECT to scroll through items to use (mainly on the first level), but pressing START will engage the x-ray specs mode, and if Bart is using them while a person is walking around, he can spot and see if an alien is on their head. If he hops on the person's head, an alien icon will fall off. Collecting them will fill up the letters of a family member's name for that level, allowing them to assist Bart when he faces that stage's boss. In the first level of Springfield, the use of the Simpsons property is strong (calling Moe's tavern is fun) and there are some creative problem-solving ideas at work. However, the later levels trade that in for more difficult enemies and unfair platforming. It's not without its merits, but overall it's not fun and bogged down with issues.

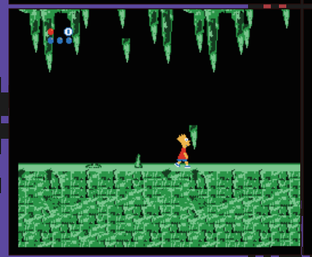
Reflections: Like many children, I was a fan of *The Simpsons*, so naturally I would enjoy playing an NES game based on it. Sure! But not this one. As a kid, I could never get past the second stage – the part at the mall where you platform over cement. That was one of the worst NES rentals I've ever made. My friend Kevin happened to own this game, but it mostly went unplayed for *DuckTales* instead... a much better choice I would say. – PC

The Simpsons: Bart vs. the World

Genre: Platformer
Release Date: Dec. 1991
Developer: Imagineering
Publisher: Acclaim Entertainment
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⋆

The second NES *Simpsons* game features Bart Simpson winning a worldwide "treasure hunt" in a contest, but it's actually Mr. Burns' plan to murder the Simpsons! Players must stop the international Burns family, traversing high seas, ice caves, tombs, and other locations. There are *Simpsons*-related cameos and power-ups, like the Jebediah Springfield head that gives invincibility and a Bartman icon that grants temporary flight, and most songs are re-arrangements of the Simpsons theme, which are surprisingly memorable. Its platforming sequences are average: you jump from place to place, avoiding enemy attacks, collecting treasure, and looking for the exit. Bart has a life meter and can attack with items like cherry bombs. Enemies are unique to their locales but stale, like pirates on a ship, bats in caves, skeletons in graveyards, etc. Sprites are drawn without outlines, making them look sloppy and hard to discern against the backgrounds. That's especially frustrating in the skateboarding level, where you must avoid obstacles and pits at high speed. The difficulty feels unfair occasionally, since Bart's jump is imprecise and falling through platforms is easy. However, the controls and level design aren't broken – they're just nothing special. Each world has a literal map screen where you choose levels and mini-games in which you can win extra lives. These mini-games add variety and make the game more fun. The highlight is the Simpsons trivia game because it has the biggest connection with the show. There's also a card memory game, sliding puzzle, shell game, and others. One unique challenge offered is finding all the Simpson family members and Krusty treasures hidden throughout the levels to see the full ending. Is it worth it? That depends on how much you like NES platformers.

Reflections: *Bart vs. the World* was on the cover of my very first issue of *Game Players Nintendo Guide* magazine (much later *Game Players*). Gnarly! Not long after receiving it, I rented *Bart vs. the World* from the video store, eager to try out the walkthrough in the magazine. It felt great to be able to find the secret Krusty treasure items quickly and know where I needed to go. However, it didn't help with the awkward controls, and even after multiple rentals I could not get past the first few levels. Fortunately, the walkthrough's descriptions and screenshots could let me vicariously enjoy the game, allowing me to see the levels I could never reach. For years after this, I'd read entire walkthroughs to games for which I didn't even have the consoles. In the case of games like *Bart vs. the World*, it's a lot more fun to let someone else do the playing. – KN

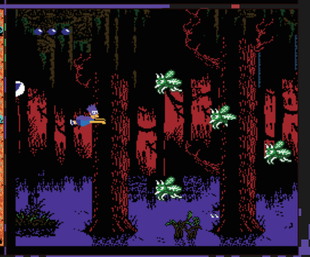


The Simpsons: Bartman Meets Radioactive Man

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Dec. 1992
Developer: Imagineering
Publisher: Acclaim Entertainment
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★⋆

Bart takes on the mantle of Bartman to rescue Radioactive Man in this action-platformer. Consisting of a handful of large levels, Bartman will platform and take on cartoonish enemies with a punch and kick attack. It's a largely useless attack, as enemies requiring multiple hits will walk right through them and still hit Bart. He starts with five hit points, but players gain more via radioactive symbols strewn throughout the levels to restore them. There are also a couple power-ups available which are essential to taking out enemies: eye laser, cold breath, invincibility tornado (limited time), and the ability to fly in a couple of areas. The levels offer a good variety of environments: junkyard, sewers, underwater, underground volcano, and more. They are mostly nonlinear and require a little bit of exploration. The enemies are cartoonish, match the source material style, and nicely fit the environment. However, the levels aren't too interesting themselves, as they plod along at a slow pace, and most of the challenge comes from precarious platforming, with artificial difficulty coming from the subpar jumping controls. There are some attempts at flashiness but it's mostly mundane. Fortunately, the platforming levels are interspersed with swimming levels and even a flying shooter stage – all competently produced but unspectacular. And that could be the biggest shame of all, as there's potential here of a good game that is squandered for an average one.

Reflections: The last in the underwhelming Bart NES trilogy, this title maintains the same murky yet somehow still clear cartoony look of the first two games. I was a fan of *The Simpsons* the first few years it was on television (as was most of the world). In fact, I first saw the proto-cartoon shorts that premiered on *The Tracey Ullman Show*. At the time, the biggest star was not Homer but the young rascal Bart, with catchphrases like "Eat my shorts" and "Don't have a cow, man!" There was Bart Simpson and Simpsons merchandise everywhere in the early '90s: t-shirts, plush dolls, toys, hats, you name it. Eventually, the audience and the writers matured and the focus of the humor and attention shifted to Homer, who started as a stubborn family man but eventually transformed into a total buffoon. I watched the show a lot for the first six years or so, and still remember watching the episode with the *Punch-Out!!* parody when it premiered. When I stopped watching was around the time when the original writers stopped working on the show, which included the young, plucky Conan O'Brien. Now, am I saying that I have the same comedic sensibilities as Conan? Of course not. Hmm, OK, maybe I am. – PC

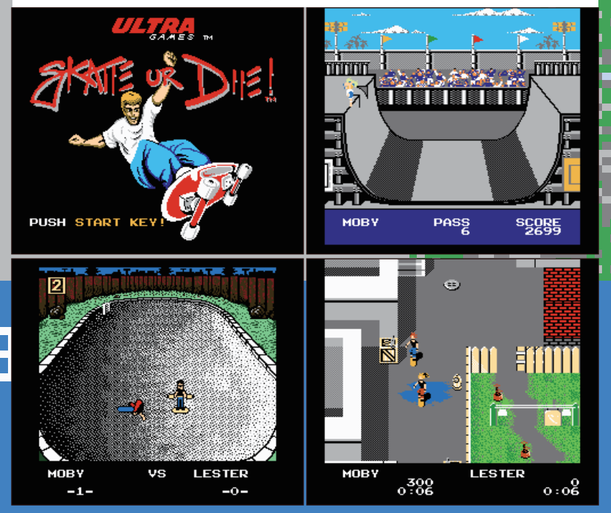


Skate or Die!

Genre: Action, Sports
Release Date: Dec. 1988
Developer: Electronic Arts
Ported by: Konami
Publisher: Ultra Games
Players: 1-8 (2 simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★

Play begins in the skate shop, where players are greeted by Rodney Recloose (a Rodney Dangerfield lookalike in punk hair and attire). After registering up to eight player names, players have the ability to practice or compete in four different skateboarding events. From an overhead map screen, players can guide the skater into different paths to play individual events or compete in all five: Downhill Race, Downhill Jam, High Jump, Freestyle, and Pool Joust. In Downhill Race, players skate vertically down a short outdoor course with obstacles like gravel, ramps, and pipes. Players can steer left/right, duck or do jumps to get through. High Jump is a straightforward ramp event where players will mash the B button and D-pad to jump as high as possible off the ramp for the maximum height measurement. Freestyle is another ramp event where players can score points by using the D-pad and button combinations to perform moves such as kickturns, rail slides, hand plants, and aerial moves. This event is the deepest of the bunch, the most challenging, and requires some practice before mastering all the moves and timing needed. Downhill Jam is a vertical race in a back alley against another player to the finish line (a police car). Players can perform jumps, run over cans for a speed burst, but most importantly can punch and kick the other skater to take them off their board. Finally, Pool Joust asks the player to take on one of three opponents of increasing difficulty. The event takes place in an empty inground pool, and players will take turns with five passes/attempts each to hit the other off their board using a pugil stick (the first to three points wins). The events are pretty interesting and all different (if short-lived), and the controls are adequate, if not fantastic. Graphically, the game is average, although the music tracks bop along nicely. Up to eight players can have a go, but only two allow for simultaneous action (Pool Joust and Jam). It offers a nice diversion for skateboarding fun, but the lack of more events or a better structure really hurts the replay value.

Reflections: The most popular skateboarding game on the NES, *Skate or Die!* does an admirable job of attempting to incorporate different aspects of the skateboarding scene into the title. While events like Freestyle are par for the course, more obtuse (and dare I say, reckless) events like Pool Joust are nice to see. The counter culture attitude abounds here, with the punky Rodney character, who happens to be the father of Lester, the toughest Pool Joust competitor. Speaking of them, I look a little bit like Poseur Pete, I must say. My friend Vincent owned this game, along with the radical (by radical, I mean awful) Roll 'N Rocker controller by LJN, where you use your feet to tilt a small board. You don't know "fun" until you're using the Roll 'N Rocker in the Downhill Race, and failing miserably every step of the way. – PC



Skate or Die 2: The Search for Double Trouble

Genre: Action, Sports
Release Date: Apr. 1990
Developer: Electronic Arts
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⯪

Another helping of rad, bad, attitude-filled skateboarding fun features two main modes of play titled Adventure and Ramp. In the first, the player takes the hero on his skateboard through a series of side-scrolling levels to rescue his girlfriend while using paint guns, eggs, and other weapons to stop the thugs in his way. Most of the levels are fairly basic. Players start on a normal street and take out rival skaters with the relatively nonviolent weapons on hand. The occasional garage/storage area will be open for exploration, usually containing the more valuable weapons in the game. Often there is an enemy inside and the platforming is just plain frustrating, making whatever rewards these areas hold not worth it. Some levels have a very unique spark, such as the mall level in which you are tasked to complete a series of deliveries for different stores within a certain time limit, while handling the terrain and fending off the enemies. Unfortunately, the controls are miserable and make playing the game with precision, something one will need as the game progresses, a near impossibility. Inching precisely is chunky, and the board moves at an awkward speed, making combat and especially platforming a nightmare. It's a case of a fun idea totally ruined by controls that hadn't been fine-tuned, or tuned at all. Ramp mode fares much better and is the reason to check this title out. It's just one half-pipe, but the tricks are fun to pull off and the coding makes it a smooth experience. There's a ramp in the center of the half pipe that one can trick over or use to make a quick return to the lip they just came from. It's very addicting with a "just one more play" hook, and definitely feels like it was put together by an entirely different team that had nothing to do with the messy main game.

Reflections: This was a case of "play what you have" when I was growing up. I've completed the Adventure mode but only after too many wasted hours grappling with the lousy controls. It really could have been fun with a bit more effort. The Ramp mode still entertains me and I always cringe when the kid splits his head on the coping. The title track is definitely top-five material. – IF

"Skate or Die. Skate skate, skate or die, die die die die die." It's a great digitized voice-sampled title song which is funny as hell to me each time the game comes on. To me, it's also the highlight of the game, and what I think EA put most of their time into. – PC

Ski Or Die

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Feb. 1991
Developer: Electronic Arts
Ported by: Konami
Publisher: Ultra Games
Players: 1-6
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

Strap on a snowboard or pair of skis in this spinoff sequel to the 1988 hit *Skate Or Die!* where the player competes in five wintery mini-games. The hub menu world consists of all the events available to practice in as well as a "compete in all" option. Downhill Blitz, Acro Aerials, Inner Tube Thrash, Snowboard Half Pipe, and Snowball Blast all sound fun to play, but for the most part that is not the case. The snowball fight is the most fun, pitting the player in a first-person snowball shootout against other competitors and wildlife. It is well animated and a joy to play simply because it feels fresh and the controls work. The half pipe looks great, gives a sense of speed, and feels responsive as the rider performs tricks and avoids obstacles. The other events are attractive, but the gameplay and sense of speed are both lacking. The control scheme is so complex at times that it becomes an utter disaster (Acro Aerials being the biggest offender), with moves difficult to pull off, especially the landing of aerial maneuvers. Precision button presses and direction movement is required, with the player being punished at even the slightest fault. Inner Tube Thrash is a top-down race to the bottom of the mountain before your opponent which lasts a very slow eternity, and Downhill Blitz becomes confusing as to what areas are safe to land on while break-neck speeding down the mountain landscape on skis. The idea of having a winter alternative to skateboarding is great, but this is so sloppily executed in places that it becomes a chore. Presentation is extreme and gnarly, but even with a few buddies playing together the game will attract a few laughs at its expense and not because of the fun that could have been.

Reflections: The overall presentation feels too familiar to its skater brethren in that at times it appears exactly the same but with a lick of snow over it. The snowball fight is great fun and once I got the hang of the half pipe controls I tried several times to beat my scores, so there are some addictive qualities there. Inner Tube Thrash is simply a poor man's *Toobin'* (which is incredibly dull to play) and Acro Aerials is more a test of my sanity than dexterity. The mess of the downhill skiing has fun in its sense of speed, but is ultimately confusing. – JE

The snowball fight game is waaaay more fun than it has any right to be and makes me wonder: why not produce a full blown snowball fight game on the NES? Picture building snow forts via a *Rampart*-like interface combined with some real-time strategy battling. Gather resources (snow), use those resources for building and attacking, and then avoid the special attack where your opponent summons your mom to tell you to stop playing and come in to warm up with some hot cocoa! Can you not smell the $$$? – PC

Skull & Crossbones

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: 1990
Developer: Atari Games
Ported by: Tengen
Publisher: Tengen
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★

One Eye the pirate has to track down a wizard who kidnapped the princess in this strange action game. Players select from one of six levels to play, which range from easy to difficult. They consist of three pirate ship levels, a house of ninjas, a castle, and a beach cave, each with their own end boss. The wizard's level is unlocked after beating the first six. Gameplay is side-scrolling and consists of the player taking out stage-specific enemies and critters while avoiding stage hazards like rolling barrels and cannons. Many platforms are available to jump up and down from, but players will be trapped on one side of the stage until killing a certain amount of enemies to unlock the second half. Players are armed by default with their weak and short fist, but can find icons for three weapons: sword, throwing knife, and pistol. They can be switched from one to another via menu, but are one-use weapons, even the sword, meaning that if the player has built up 10 swords, they can only use it 10 times before it's gone. This is very frustrating due to the fact that weapons can quickly run out, and the default punch is insufficient for defeating a lot of enemies. This is especially true of the end bosses, like the ax executioner who simply traps you and swings constantly with no rhyme or reason or pattern; it's simply a matter of who drops first (usually the player). Treasure and booty can be obtained in the levels, which can happen after walking and having treasure chests appear. Touching these chests will open them, but players must be careful not to pick up poison and lose a life. At the end of levels, the treasure is exchanged for more weapons for the next one. Difficulty is pretty tough, even outside the end bosses, with the AI of standard enemies enough to give players headaches with their retreating and movement to match One Eye. The graphics are pretty good and the voice samples are impressive, with lots of yells, grunts, and the laughs of enemy bosses. An interesting but bizarre split-screen two-player mode is available, but the second player will appear as a pair of feet on the other player's screen half. There are some good ideas here, but blimey, the final product is a semi-sunken ship.

Reflections: The arcade *Skull & Crossbones* game was a unique hack 'n slasher featuring nicely drawn cartoon graphics and a fencing sword-fighting system where the player could thrust up, level, or down in succession, as well as parry. There was also a funny talking parrot who followed you around. This port of the game had none of that, obviously. The story cutscenes feature the Evil Wizard with his hands emanating electricity while slowly advancing towards the chained princess. Inappropriate? A little. But it's not nearly as bad as when the game ends, when the wizard is next to the princess, seemingly fondling her with said electricity. Blech. I need a shower. – PC

Sky Kid

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Sept. 1987
Developer: Namco
Publisher: Sunsoft
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

The player controls a World War I biplane in this cute and snappy horizontal shooter. Play progresses right to left, with players taking off and landing for each mission's start and end. The plane is equipped with a gun which will be used to take out enemy air targets like planes and blimps, and ground targets like trucks and tanks. If struck, the plane will tumble towards the ground but can be recovered by smashing the A button to loop out of it. The A button will also cause the plane to do a loop-de-loop defensive maneuver normally as well. At least one bomb on each level can be picked up by the player's plane in order to try and drop on the enemy ship/fortress (for bonus points to gain extra lives), but the A button will be unavailable to loop while carrying the bomb (it's reserved for dropping it), making the play more precarious at that moment. Likewise, getting hit by a plane or enemy's fire will cause the bomb to drop as well. The cartoony graphics style is reminiscent of earlier arcade titles and its Namco heritage, the music and sound effects are both endearing, and it's a very challenging shooter with lots to shoot/avoid on the screen constantly. It starts simple but quickly ramps up, with the sky being filled by many enemy craft and fire from both air and ground units, requiring some deft movement and attacking. The two-player simultaneous mode rounds out this adorable shooter quite nicely.

Reflections: Ah, such fond memories of *Sky Kid*. My friend Kevin had this title, and it was one that I usually enjoyed borrowing. It starts out fairly easy but by eight or nine levels in you'll definitely be on your toes. I loved the fact that Pac-Man appeared on advertising billboards, and that you could change day into night by flipping your plane around the sun. It was also fun (and strange) that you could shoot and kill the lovely ladies that awaited your landing at the end of each level, transforming them into puffy ghosts. It's small touches like that which usually show a developer's deep love of the game they're putting together. – PC

Sky Shark

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Sept. 1989
Developer: Toaplan
Ported by: Software Creations
Publisher: Taito
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

Players fly and fight through five wartorn stages in this by-the-numbers arcade shooter. The game starts in the jungle and sees the pilot through desert, military installment, and water-themed locations. The P-40 plane has two attacks, a normal shot and a bomb. The normal shot can be upgraded by collecting S icons that appear after taking out an entire wave of red planes. It can be upgraded multiple times to increase the size of the player's main attack. Bombs can be used to wipe incoming bullets off the screen as well as destroy all enemies within a certain radius. This differs from many similar games where bombs clear all enemies from the screen, adding a certain element of strategy to their usage here. Enemies come in a few basic forms, mostly planes, battleships, tanks, and a few others that fit the standard military theme. Enemy bullets come in quickly and are all aimed at the player. Problematically, these bullets are very hard to see in spots due to extreme amounts of flicker, often against unattractive backgrounds. The graphics in general are weak, blocky, and rough around the actual edges of the sprites. After beating the fifth stage, the game loops, but it takes a minute to notice, as everything starts to look the same even before this occurs. A lack of anything resembling a true boss adds to the overall generic feel. Each level has at least one "big" enemy that is tougher than the others, but they act more as a mid-boss. The only showpiece is a large bomber plane near the end of stage five. Soundwise, the game has barely passable effects but offers a catchy soundtrack courtesy of composer Tim Follin. The experience still manages to be decent in the face of some significant snags. Its biggest crime is simply not standing out from the crowd. It's an okay pick for shooter fans but will likely be met with a lukewarm reaction from anyone else.

Reflections: Military/air combat shooter tropes were already in full effect by the time this game was made. Jungle level? Check. A very large plane boss? Absolutely. It's fun to see how developers tried to turn this theme on its head as the years went on. Adding mech bosses, lasers, animal pilots, anything to keep military-style shooters fresh - many times with funny or fun results. *Sky Shark* would eventually be followed up by *Fire Shark* in arcades and on the Sega Genesis. – IF

Slalom

Genre: Racing, Sports
Release Date: Mar. 1987
Developer: Rare
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

Cruise down the slopes in this fast-paced, third-person perspective skiing game. Clad in what looks to be red pajamas, the player must race through several courses in the allotted time on one of three different mountains while avoiding obstacles like trees, snowmen, other skiers, and suicidal sledding children (who somehow can slide uphill). Smashing into these annoyances will cause your skier to tumble in the air or crash, wasting precious time. On the courses, players can jump and tuck their poles via DOWN for faster speed. The slalom flags, if navigated correctly, will keep the skier traveling at a high speed, but skiing on the wrong side of them will slow your skier down. There are also plenty of moguls (bumps) that the player can launch off of to perform freestyle tricks for bonus points. Controls are fine, with just the right amount of "slippage" you'd expect from traveling on snow. As the courses progress and more obstacles and other skiers inhabit the course, it can get pretty hectic to make the course time. It's a nice and challenging game, if a little bit simplistic.

Reflections: For those who care, this was Rare's first console release, and also the first NES game not developed in Japan. *Slalom* is pretty well polished for an early black box game, and is the only skiing game on the system besides *Ski or Die*. I'm not sure what sort of ski resort would let random trees grow in the middle of their courses, let alone let kids make snowmen and go snow tubing on them. When your skier tucks his poles to go faster, he lets the viewers get a glimpse of his muscular and round, ummm, posterior. – PC

While the NES game is fun, it's the arcade version that sticks out most in my mind with its mini skis players can stand on and use to control the game. Huge, complicated cabinets became very common by the '90s, but it's these early examples that I find the most endearing. – IF

Smash T.V.

Genre: Run and Gun Shooter
Release Date: Sept. 1991
Developer: Williams
Ported by: Beam Software
Publisher: Acclaim Entertainment
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: NES Four Score / Satellite compatible
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★½

Set on a violent game show, players shoot enemies for survival while picking up cash and prizes like VCRs and toasters. In single-screen rooms, this overhead shooter allows players to move and shoot in all eight directions as they have to fend off an onslaught of foot soldiers who will try to get close to and beat the player with bats, as well as deal with robots, drones, and more. The pace is relentless, as players will have to scramble away from enemies on all sides while shooting at them. Thankfully, players can back away and can strafe while shooting by locking their aiming position with the B button while shooting with A. An even better option is the ability to use the D-pad of two controllers by turning them on their sides: one is used to move the player and the other shoots independently in the direction pressed. Playing this way is an absolute pleasure, giving the player total freedom to weave in and out of enemies while miraculously fending off and surviving a circling horde. After defeating the plethora of enemies in one room, players can collect bonus prizes and move onto the next room until finally meeting up with the end boss Mutoid Man. It's very challenging and draining, but lots of fun. Power-ups are thankfully littered throughout the rooms, which include timed weapon upgrades like missiles, spread fire, and grenades, increasing foot speed, and limited shields. While the graphics aren't great, they get the job done, and average voice samples are squeezed in as well. If you're looking for a unique, frantic shooter, this is the game show for you, with the two-player mode being a bonus blast.

Reflections: My above score of course reflects playing the game with two controllers, as that stays true to its arcade roots, where two joysticks were used per player. Using a Four Score, it's possible to emulate the arcade experience by using two Advantage joysticks! The SNES version is a near perfect translation of the arcade game, and it uses the four SNES buttons to emulate a second D-pad.

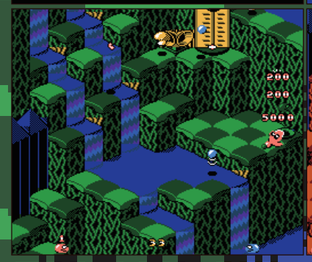
This game has its inspiration in the Arnold Schwarzenegger film *The Running Man*, which had a similar "deadly game show" theme. One of the sound samples used in the game, "I'd buy that for a dollar," was a line featured in *RoboCop*. Obviously, the folks at Midway were fans of over-the-top, ultra-violent flicks. – PC

Snake Rattle ‘n’ Roll

Genre: Platformer
Release Date: July 1990
Developer: Rare
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⯪

This isometric platformer features two snakes, Rattle and Roll (two-player mode), who must travel through 11 challenging levels. Rattle has his trusty tongue to battle enemies, and can smoothly jump around (and on enemies). The objective of each level is to use the snake’s tongue to consume colored balls (known as “Nibbley Pibbleys”), with each one becoming part of the snake’s tail. These are found via holes in the ground that are walked over, as well as being dispensed from speakers (but watch out, since bombs can be thrown out too). When enough are consumed, the end of the tail will flash, which means the scale near the end of each level can be jumped up to ring the bell and activate the door to exit the level. However, if an enemy touches Rattle, one segment of the tail will disappear, requiring the player to eat more Nibbley Pibbleys to restore it. The levels are timed, so having to go back and consume more Nibbley Pibbleys or having to jump precariously back up fallen parts of the level means every second counts. The isometric platforming is the weakest part of the experience, as having to judge distances between jumps can be rough, and having to move laterally in mid-air to and from ledges will have you falling more often than you’d think. There are also various hazards, such as spikes, falling anvils, blades, and even sharks in the water, that will definitely make this a game not for the faint of heart. Power-ups include tongue extensions, limited invincibility, increased speed, more time, extra lives, and an annoying one to reverse the controls. The game looks absolutely gorgeous, with lush colors and nice level and character design, and the groovy 1950s rock ‘n roll soundtrack is a treat. However, the challenge will be very off-putting to some, but at the very least you can enjoy one of the most unique NES gameplay experiences before your lives run out.

Reflections: My little cousin had this game as a kid, and I cannot imagine how quickly the six-year-old must have turned the game off and played *Super Mario Bros. 2* instead. I was a little older (and a much better gamer), and I don’t even think I ever completed the third level as a kid. It’s insanely difficult, but the gameplay is very fun, and Rare cooked up a visual and audio feast. – PC

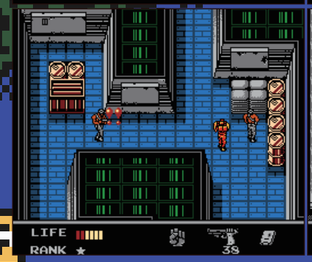


Snake’s Revenge

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: Apr. 1990
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Ultra Games
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

Solid Snake must infiltrate the stronghold of Higharolla Kockamamie and destroy his Metal Gear war mechs, halting his reign of terror. The player is tasked on stealthing through a jungle, abandoned village, ship freighter and even a high speed train while avoiding patrolling guards’ lines of sight. If Snake is spotted, the alarm sounds and all hell breaks loose – forcing the player to flee or fight. You can go all in guns blazing, but the key to progression is to use patience and cunning, at times even bypassing guards all together. Knowing to avoid confrontation at all costs and only fight as a last resort is the difference between success and failure. The game is played on a top-down perspective and switches into side-scrolling action segments at various crossroads. Scattered throughout the nonlinear game are various weapons such as pistols, machine guns, and even homing rockets – it is essential to find these as well as key cards and all sorts of secret agent gadgetry. Too much time is spent in the baffling item menu however, spoiling the immersion. Collecting eight key cards and having to pause the game to randomly try one is not fun. Rescuing prisoners increases Snake’s life meter and ammo capacity which becomes vital as the difficulty ramps up. Ammo and item capacity isn’t an issue as the game encourages the player to cheat, though. Just collect some ammo or food rations, leave the room and reenter again to rinse and repeat, watering down the tension. In the end, the open world gameplay hook, quality soundtrack and the overall fun compensate for the somewhat awkward control scheme and poorly executed menu screens.

Reflections: *Snake’s Revenge* eases the confusion caused by its predecessor, *Metal Gear*. It seems less daunting and more approachable, but is not an improvement over the original. The key to the game is to treat it as a rudimentary bout of hide-and-seek, only with added shivving. It becomes a huge chore listening to the ear-bleeding alarm sound and then having to mass-murder identical goons, but the challenge is to avoid confrontation completely, which is pretty unique. The sheer amount of level variety throughout the game is surprising. The side-scroller sections comparable to *Rush ’n Attack* are initially interesting, but after realizing that I may as well be controlling Snake with a shoe instead of the game pad, they quickly became frustrating. Also, what is the name “Higharolla Kockamamie” about?! The end boss is called Big Boss – staple Metal Gear canon – not some plastered-together bad pun that is written in the manual. Still, the gameplay and fun outweighs the design flaws, which makes it interesting and enjoyable enough to play. Note: series creator Hideo Kojima wasn’t actually aware of this game’s existence until a developer brought it to his attention! – JE

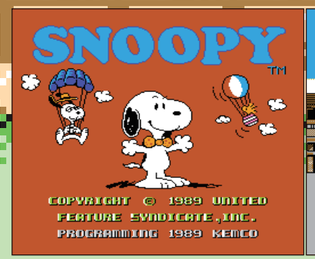


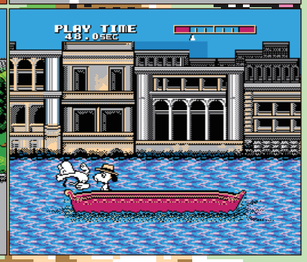
Snoopy’s Silly Sports Spectacular!

Genre: Sports, Action
Release Date: Apr. 1990
Developer: Kemco
Publisher: Kemco
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★⯪

This sports competition of silliness has one or two players available as Snoopy and brother Spike compete in six events. Players may choose either a single event or competing in all in a row. Sack Race is a simple horizontal race against a competitor while avoiding open manholes by timing jumps. Boot Throwing, similar to a hammer throw, has the player rotate the D-pad to gather speed and then hitting A to release at the proper moment to toss the boot into the air for distance. Pogo has the player use a pogo stick to try and jump over wood obstacles – the most awkward and arguably worst event of the bunch. Overboard pits Snoopy and Spike against each other on a gondola to see who can slap the other into the water. River Jump is a simple pole vault over water, and Pile of Pizza is a straining bore of an event where players must slowly walk to the finish line while balancing pizzas in their arms, as going too fast will drop them, resulting in a point penalty. For what it is, the game is cute, but it’s very simple with no real frills or replayability. The single-player mode is a lonely time since there are only two competitions where you actually see another character. And besides seeing Snoopy, Spike, and Woodstock, it isn’t the best use of the Peanuts license. Recommended for fans of that series only, or for a quick two-player change of pace.

Reflections: I’m not the biggest fan of *Peanuts*, so I’m glad I could review this objectively. This was a sprite swap from the Japanese version (which featured Donald Duck), so that goes to show you just how connected this game is to the actual Peanuts world (read: none). If Ian reviewed this, he probably would have begrudgingly given it four and a half stars. – PC





Snow Brothers

Genre: Action
Release Date: Nov. 1991
Developer: Toaplan
Ported by: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★

In this single-screen action game, players take control of Nick and Tom the snowmen who must defeat all the enemies on the screen by throwing and covering them with snow, and then rolling the created snowball into a wall. The rolling snowball will bounce off of walls and will take out other enemies if they are hit along the way. Players can also throw snowballs by jumping from below them, and if they travel with a rolling ball will gain limited invincibility after it hits a wall. Enemies hit with a snowball will drop power-up potions to increase the speed of Nick/Tom or the length/power of the snow throws. Players can move along at their leisure at clearing the screen of enemies, but if they take too long, a flying pumpkin will appear to shoot ghosts and harass the player. The single-touch deaths make sure players are spry and careful. Every tenth screen will result in a boss that must be defeated before moving on. It’s a technically sound game with good graphics, controls, and animation, but the fun diminishes from a little bit of monotony, given that the only real change from level to level is the arrangement of the platforms, while the gameplay and challenge itself doesn’t really evolve too much. Still, if you’re searching for arcade-style action, give it a whirl, if for no other reason than for the strange somersault jumps Nick and Tom make.

Reflections: *Snow Brothers* is a game that I always find myself saying “Wow, this is fun!” for the first few minutes until I realize it’s the same short game that repeats over and over again. It’s related to *Bubble Bobble* in that regard, but the Taito game is far more charming and is a lot more varied in the strategy that must be employed as levels progress. Plus, capturing all the food is fun! And maybe, just maybe, subconsciously I find living and breathing snowmen to be really frightening, versus cute cartoon dinosaurs. – PC

Soccer

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Oct. 1985
Developer: Nintendo R&D1
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⋆

In this no-frills sports title, players can compete in a five-versus-five single soccer match, with seven selectable international teams, three play lengths, and five difficulty levels. The gameplay on the horizontal field is simple but adequate for a soccer game. Players can run with the ball (with a staccato dribble), pass, and shoot with the ability to aim at the goal using an on-screen arrow. On defense, players can switch to the player closest to the ball and attempt to kick it away when close to the ball carrier. Players also control their goalie to make saves. Applicable soccer rules are included, with elements like offsides, free kicks, goal kicks, corner kicks, and throw-ins. Penalty kicks result from a tie game. There's not a lot here, but what's available is fine for a bare-bones soccer experience that plays at times like you're at a foosball table, with the ball passing back and forth between the two teams frequently. The presentation is cute, with a nice music theme during the game. If it's not too exciting a time for you, then stick around for the halftime cheerleader show!

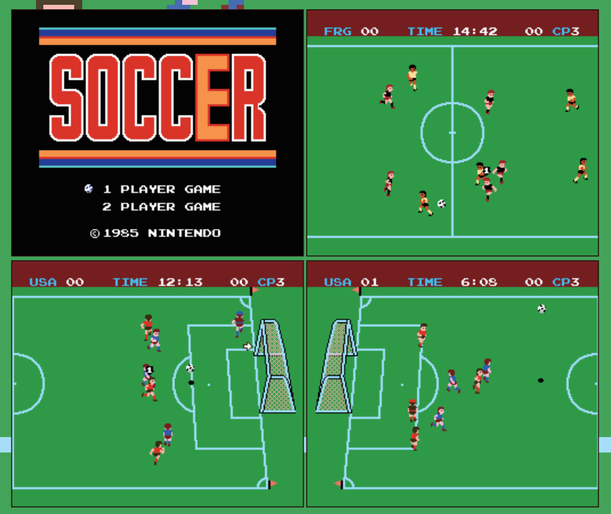
Reflections: I didn't grow up with soccer, nor did I ever really play it as a kid. I think I may have known one kid who owned this game. That said, I think earlier NES titles (and sports games in particular), should be weighed at least a little differently than newer ones. *Soccer* is actually playable and represents the sport's experience properly, unlike *Baseball* where you cannot even move your fielders. – PC

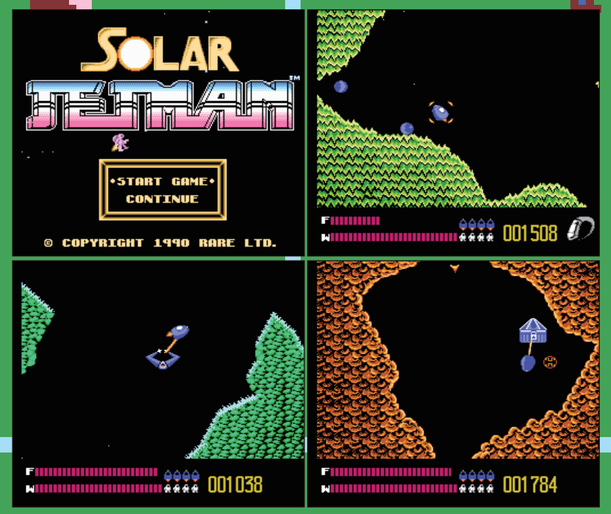
Solar Jetman: Hunt for the Golden Warpship

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Sept. 1990
Developer: Zippo Games, Rare
Publisher: Tradewest
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⋆

Pieces of the mighty Golden Warpship have been scattered across the galaxy, so it is up to Solar Jetman to retrieve them. This multi-directional shooter uses a momentum and gravity mechanic that affects Jetman's Jetpod (egg-shaped probe ship), which has a thruster to counterbalance it and traverse each stage. A plethora of enemy UFOs, turrets, and metallic beasties stands in the way as he tries to navigate caverns, but Jetman has access to guns, missiles, and bombs that can be purchased by spending collected booty. Thrusters, shields, fuel, and ship parts must be towed back to the mothership before take-off, which adds a puzzle element, as the salvaged item greatly affects the Jetpod's momentum. If the probe ship is destroyed, Jetman himself appears and must return to base in order to get a new ship. He has better maneuverability but lacks the Jetpod's 360-degree range of fire, and if he takes a hit, he loses a life. Once enough items are collected, it is onto the next stage, with a money-earning bonus stage in between. Although it has fiddly controls at times, this is a fresh title that stands out amongst generic space shooters.

Reflections: This is a fun surprise considering the sheer amount of games set in space in the console's library - it offers a challenge that isn't just "shoot and dodge." The added element of risk versus reward is always looming - do you try to explore just a little bit further or return to base before the probe's fuel depletes? Towing a ship part can be infuriating, as they can drag your ship down even at full thrust, but I find that flying under the item at speed before the towbar connects adds that extra oomph needed to drag it. Mix in enemies trying to scupper your job of intergalactic repo-man, and it makes for quite the tense time. If you want something that you can play at a slower pace (because you can't just rush in), then give *Solar Jetman* a chance. – JE





Solitaire

Genre: Puzzle
Release Date: 1992
Developer: Odyssey Software
Publisher: American Video Entertainment
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Rare
★⋆

In this traditional solitaire card game, players start with seven rows of a 52 card deck dealt at the bottom, with one overturned on the bottom of each. The object is to maneuver and draw cards to stack them in order, starting from King downward with alternating colored suits. When an Ace is available, it is to be taken out and placed separately at the top, and then from 2 upwards, cards are to be placed on the appropriately suited stack up until the King is reached. Play continues until no more maneuvers can be made, and/or the same cards are redrawn with no difference. The control consists of simply clicking cards and moving them via cursor pointer. Moving cards back and forth from the Ace stacks back down to the row of card stacks seems to be a missing gameplay element, even though it exists in other versions of the game. Options include choosing the number of cards drawn at one time, one (which is easy) or three (which is difficult). There's also the option to alter the look and color of the cards, as well as turning music and sounds on and off. If you're looking for a solitaire fix on your NES, this could do the trick, but it's not clear who would be.

Reflections: It's always tough to review and grade a game like *Solitaire*. Does it do what it advertises competently? Sure. Does it play alright? OK. Is it fun to play? If you like Solitaire, I suppose. Does it deserve your time to play it on the NES? That's the question I usually defer to at the end of the day. Sure, you can color a pretty mean dino with *Color a Dinosaur*, but would you or your four-year-old really want to?

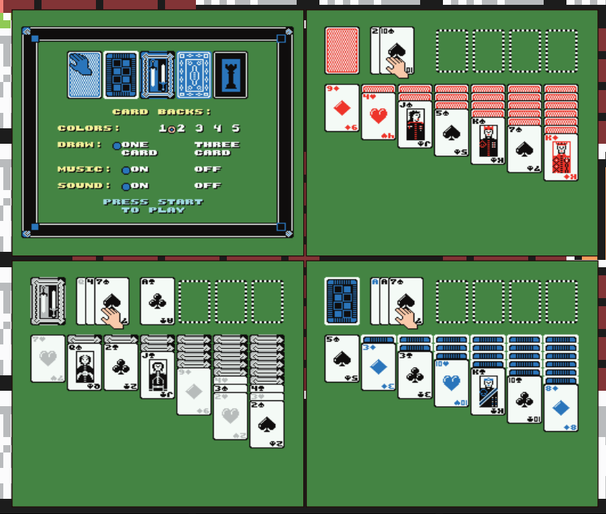
I'd be remiss if I failed to mention the PRESS HERE instruction that AVE prints on all of their NES game labels to let players know to press the games down to insert them into their NES. Why stop there, AVE? Why not also print "Press power and then use a controller to play" instructions? If you seriously need instructions to turn on an NES game, I doubt you would have made it through the dangerous back-alleys and dealt with the denizens of the underworld in order to purchase an AVE game in the first place. – PC

Solomon's Key

Genre: Puzzle, Action
Release Date: July 1987
Developer: Tecmo
Publisher: Tecmo
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⋆

The wizard Dana must defeat the demons and restore peace to the world in this action puzzler. In single screen rooms, the object is to guide Dana to the key to unlock the door, and then get to that door to exit before the "life" meter (which acts as a timer) runs out. Dana's main method of moving around is by creating and destroying beige blocks with his wand. Dana can crouch and create/destroy blocks underneath, create/destroy ahead of him, and above by jumping. By doing so, Dana can create walkways, steps, etc., in order to go where he needs to. Blocks may also be created to trap enemies, although some have the ability to destroy them in their way. Several power-ups exist in the levels, and some are discovered by destroying blocks or enemies. These include Dana's only offensive weapon, a fireball, which can be used to take out an enemy – a super fireball can eliminate more than one. A limited amount of fireballs are stored on a scroll, which can be extended to store more via a scroll item pickup. There are also coins and jewels for points, power-ups to extend fireballs' shot length, extra lives, hour glasses to extend time, extra life medicine, and bells to call out fairies, which can be collected for points (ten earns an extra life). The gameplay is very challenging, as it requires creativity in thinking out a situation and planning how to address it in blocking enemies, attacking them, or moving around them. The controls thankfully are top-notch to help tackle tough situations. However, the difficulty can just be vicious, especially in levels where several enemies are in a smaller vicinity. There are 50 rooms to get through, but many won't even able to get close, due to the unrelenting challenge of some levels and an absence of a continue system to be able to experiment and try again. Still, this title is a standout in the NES library for concept alone, even if most players will be stunned when attempting to play it.

Reflections: This title was oh so fun as a child, for the first three levels or so before I would get destroyed. I've grown to appreciate it more as an adult, as I've mastered more of the nuances and have learned how to be a bit more creative in solving some of the room problems. Dana's a cool little character, so it's somewhat of a shame that he only shows up again in *Fire 'N Ice*. Tecmo, what gives? Afraid bad childhood memories of getting obliterated in this game would result in reopened wounds if you released a similarly named sequel? – PC



Solstice: The Quest for the Staff of Demnos

Genre: Action, Puzzle
Release Date: June 1990
Developer: Software Creations
Publisher: CSG Imagesoft
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

Shadax the wizard must retrieve the six pieces of the Staff of Demnos and save Princess Eleanor from Morbius the Malevolent's stronghold, Kåstlerök, comprised of over 250 rooms laid out in an isometric perspective. Shadax navigates the maze of rooms by jumping on platforms and by grabbing and placing blocks to reach inaccessible areas, often performing this move in mid-air. He faces monsters such as trolls and eyeballs, deadly spikes, hidden platforms and pitfalls, melting blocks, conveyor belts, elevator-like blocks, and more, so both puzzle-solving skills and quick reflexes are key to succeeding. Fortunately, Shadax's controls are very tight and the rooms' layouts reset upon re-entry, so errors that make a room impassible can be corrected. With a magic map he tracks visited rooms and can discover floors above or below his current location. He comes equipped with four potions, each lasting for one room: blue for near-invincibility, purple to destroy moving things, yellow to freeze moving things, and green to reveal hidden blocks. Magic boots for higher jumps can be obtained, as well as potion refills, extra lives, and keys to access new areas. Credits can be collected to continue the game, but each credit will return Shadax to the spot where he found it, sending him further back in his quest each time. This game is both challenging and engaging, with a honeycomb of rooms to explore, a perspective that makes gauging spatial relationships tricky, and stringent demands for quick thinking and acting.

Reflections: Even though this is a puzzle platformer and story/character are not the main draw, the game's manual really goes out of its way to craft a developed lore surrounding the titular staff, the treacherous stronghold, its menacing master, and most importantly, the scholarly Shadax. Indeed, the manual emphasizes that the main reason Shadax stands a chance against the superior sorcerer Morbius is that he put his time in at the library, studying ancient texts, translating rune poems, and gathering knowledge his adversary does not possess. He's a champion of the intellect, has hit more books than monsters – and this is the source of his strength, the path to his eventual triumph. So stay in school, kids, and you too may rescue a beauteous blonde from the clutches of pure evil… or at least finally pass Madame Untel's seventh grade French. It's practically the same thing. – AP

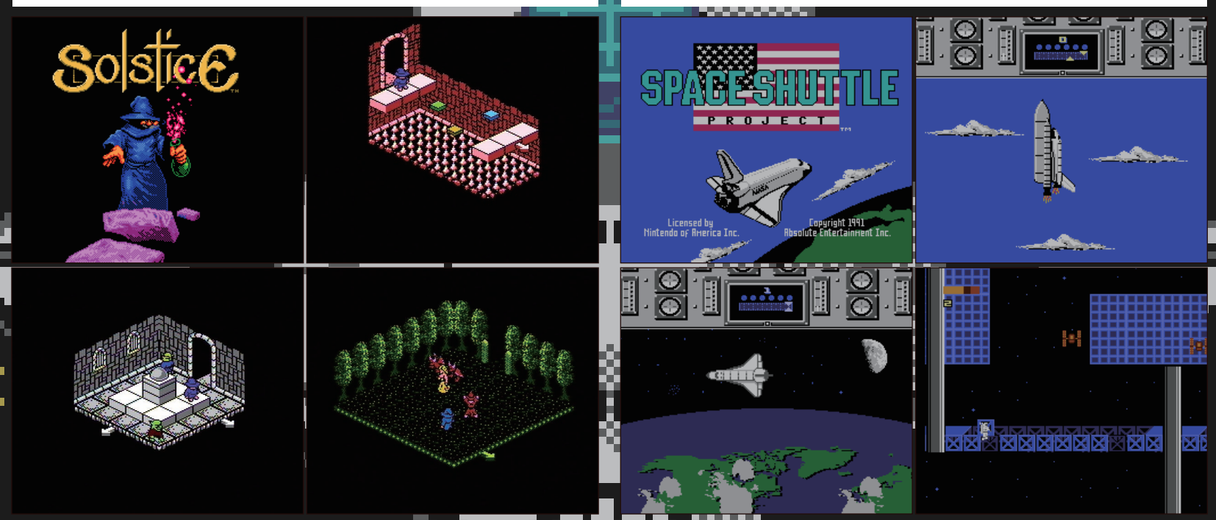
Space Shuttle Project

Genre: Action
Release Date: Nov. 1991
Developer: Imagineering
Publisher: Absolute Entertainment
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★⯪

Players blast off on space shuttle missions in this mini-game action title. There are several different missions for the player to tackle, including setting up a satellite, repairing a space station, and rescuing a stranded astronaut. Each mission consists of four parts. The first tasks the player to set up the shuttle for launch in a time limit, by moving via elevator, activating levers on the platform, and picking up the crew and getting them to the shuttle. The second part is a series of several short mini-games of reaction, timing, and memory to successfully launch the shuttle into space. The third part is the one that varies for each mission in goal, but each consists of maneuvering an astronaut in space to complete a task while avoiding moving objects and making sure not to run out of oxygen. The fourth part consists of several more mini-games, very similar to the ones at launch, to have the shuttle re-enter orbit and finally land. Players are allowed five failures over the course of the entire mission, or else they'll have to try again. Enjoyment will depend upon how much the player enjoys the mini-game portions, which can be dull, although the more challenging and engaging space-walking portions can make up for it. The presentation is very nice, with detailed graphics and nice voice samples. This is a title that straddles the education and action genres and may not be for everyone, but there's some enjoyment to be had for this unique game for the right, receptive audience.

Reflections: Such a strange, strange game, but you have to give it points just for that. There's a mini-game that starts off the game where you have to enter your passcode correctly just to begin. It's unnecessary but at least trains you for the type of challenges that will follow.

My big questions: Why is a single astronaut doing all the pre-launch preparations themselves, and why is it being timed precisely before blast-off? This seems like an ill-advised process. I don't recall Neil Armstrong running around the platform elevators and hitting switches frantically before going to the Moon, but it's been a while since I've seen the historical footage. – PC



Spelunker

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Sept. 1987
Developer: MicroGraphicImage
Ported by: Irem
Publisher: Brøderbund Software
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⯪

You're the titular Spelunker, spelunking for treasure hidden in haunted caves. It's a single-screen platformer consisting of six larger levels that scroll left/right and up/down to reveal further areas, all filled with numerous ropes to climb/jump from, platforms, elevators, and more. Deaths come frequently and it's tough from the moment you start. If you step off the elevator at the beginning incorrectly, you'll die instantly. You can't fall further than you can jump, and you die in mid-fall, requiring careful movement across the level. It's very easy to misjudge jumps or accidentally walk off ropes and platforms to your death. You can trip on rocks, fall in pits, or be killed by the only two enemies in the game: ghosts and bats. Ghosts can fly through walls to chase and kill you, and bats defecate on you and leave piles of deadly, steaming guano throughout the caves. Fortunately, you can bust ghosts with your Phantom Blaster, if it has enough power. Besides treasures, you can find helpful items like flares that blind bats and bombs that blast rock walls. You'll also need red and blue keys in order to open doors of the same color. All the while, the player will have to be mindful of the energy meter constantly dwindling (powering both the player and blaster), which will have to be replenished regularly via energy rod items. Regarding presentation: the graphics and sound are sparse, and the entirety of the game takes place in black caves. The screen doesn't scroll with you automatically, so it has to scroll itself over to the next when you reach the edge, sometimes leading to deaths from hazards you can't see. The Spelunker is animated and moves quickly and smoothly, and there many secrets to uncover on your journey to the bottom. However, whether you hate or love it may depend on your appetite for punishment and your nostalgic love of what is considered a classic of the genre.

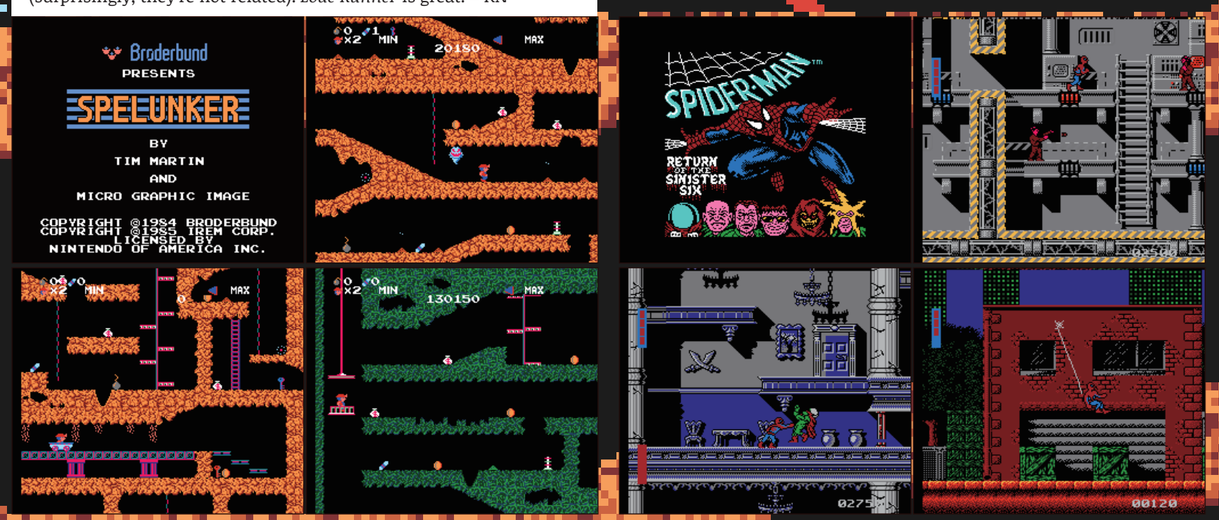
Reflections: *Spelunker* on the NES is a Japanese port of an American game ported back to America. It was first released for the Atari 8-bit computers in 1983 (developed by MicroGraphicImage) and later made its way to the Commodore 64 and other platforms. Challenge in a game is one thing, and challenge due to frustrating design is another. Frustrating design intentionally and skillfully crafted to enrage players is what's on display here. The word for that is "sadism." Yet there are plenty of masochistic gamers out there who love *Spelunker* for it. I'll admit that it was an important platformer for its time, but that doesn't mean that it's good or that I could unselfconsciously recommend the NES version to anyone. It's not about age. Brøderbund's other classic underground explorer game, *Lode Runner*, is similar to *Spelunker* in setting and theme and was made around the same time (surprisingly, they're not related). *Lode Runner* is great. – KN

Spider-Man: Return of the Sinister Six

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Oct. 1992
Developer: Bits Studios
Publisher: LJN
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★⯪

The player takes control of the web-swinging hero who has to defeat each supervillain of the Sinister Six on their own stage. As Spider-Man, the player can punch, jump kick, jump, climb, swing on webs, and attack enemies with webs via a limited supply (extra web cartridges can be picked up). Levels are sparsely filled with enemies and fairly linear, with some requiring objects to be found (such as a key) in order to unlock the entrance to the stage's boss. Boss fights require patience in avoiding attacks and getting in a jump kick or web attack when clear. Graphics, music, and sound are all very average, which is unfortunate for a later NES release. The controls are awkward and will take some getting used to, particularly the web-slinging. Some hard-to-reach areas of the levels require using web-swinging in order to get in or out of them, so the fact that the controls aren't fine can make the game frustrating. The difficulty is also a little too harsh for a game that doesn't have good controls, which relies upon tapping versus pressing a button for different functions in succession. Want to punch, kick, or fire a web? It's all the same button and it can be maddening to not just learn the differences, but also bring up the function you want at will. There's some promise here, but overall it just comes off as an unfinished product.

Reflections: You simply MUST read the manual before playing this game in order to learn the controls. It's insane how the B + A button combination was there for use, but the developers did not take advantage of mapping one of the several functions to it. Bits Studios must have not read their NES development guide thoroughly. As a huge Spider-Man fan, I'm glad that I never picked up this title and instead went with *Spider-Man & X-Men in Arcade's Revenge*, an SNES game that while not great, is leagues better than *Return of the Sinister Six*. It's almost as if LJN forgot they could still put out a Spider-Man game and farmed it out to Bits Studios, not caring about the result. But then again, you could say that for a lot of LJN's games. – PC



Spiritual Warfare

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: 1992
Developer: Wisdom Tree
Publisher: Wisdom Tree
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★⯪

In this Christian-themed game with RPG, adventure, and action elements, players must save their town from demons! Chaos reigns over its mundane suburbs, downtown, beaches, and slums. The overworld area is top-down on a black background with rocks, grass, buildings, etc., which is simple but clear. Indoors, the controls remain unchanged but the game switches to a side view, with tighter spaces and ladders for the player to move up and down on. Some passageways have sliding block puzzles in a similar, directly overhead view. Instead of killing, you throw fruits (of Spirit), causing enemies to kneel in prayer. Angels throughout the game give you the fruits, which have infinite shots and various abilities. For instance, pomegranates have a wide wave pattern, apples have long range and travel through walls, and the pear is fast. You can move diagonally but most enemies don't, so the grid-based movement makes aiming simple. You also collect vials that explode obstacles and enemies. Enemies are creative and diverse: businessmen, drunks, vandals, repairmen, everyone! Randomly, demons rush out from people you defeat, demanding alertness. Enemies drop hearts and dove icons, which are currency to buy items from angels, who also float randomly on the overworld to quiz you on scripture for prizes. Most bosses are normal enemies who fight within puzzles, requiring you to learn how to win, like maneuvering in mazes or using certain weapons. There's a status box at the top of the screen showing health (in hearts, and more can be gained), weapons, location, and items (SELECT shows a map and inventory). The town is one giant environment and it's nonlinear; just go anywhere, anytime. To progress, you use items to pass obstacles, like keys, fireproof boots to walk on fire, the Belt of Truth that lets you move boulders, etc. Remaining unaffected people give hints to their locations. Graphics and gameplay are adequate, but the biggest flaw is the music: there's only one song loop. Still, it's a strong game, and arguably the best religious one on the NES.

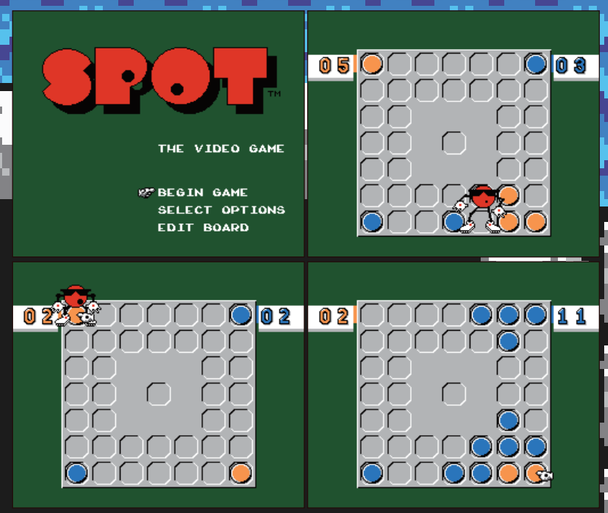
Reflections: Many of this game's detractors are bothered by how much it copies from *The Legend of Zelda*, which is true. Yet I don't have a problem with it (all great games are influential) and I don't have a lot of sympathy for Nintendo due to its stranglehold on retailers and its censorship, which *Spiritual Warfare* audaciously defies. If you're not a religious person, you can just treat *Spiritual Warfare* like any game: you fight demons using divine powers, and that's that. It's the weird mixture of the familiar with the supernatural that makes this game unique, really. You fight on the streets of a town, even going into its slums and prison – an ordinary world in chaos. I sort of admire Wisdom Tree's bold choice to make a game where you fight demons right here, right now. And that's pretty badass for NES, right? – KN

Spot: The Video Game

Genre: Board Game, Strategy
Release Date: Sept. 1990
Developer: Virgin Mastertronic
Publisher: Arcadia Systems
Players: 1-4 (simultaneous)
Special Features: NES Four Score / Satellite compatible, Edit Mode
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⯪

This somewhat *Othello*-inspired puzzle game stars Spot, the 7-Up soft drink mascot. The two opposing players start with two different colored discs each on opposite corners of a square grid board. The object of the game is to be the player with the most of their colored discs when the board is full. Play alternates with one disc movement per player. Players can choose any of their discs to move either one or two spaces away to an empty space. More discs can be gained in two ways. The first way is to duplicate your disc and move to one adjacent square. If your disc happens to adjacently touch the square of an opponent's disc, they will all turn to your color as well. The second way to move is to jump two squares away to try and flip adjacent opponent discs, but this will not duplicate your disc as it does when you move only one square away. The winning player is the one who has the most colored discs when no more moves can be made. "Funky" animations of Spot moving from one square to the next (such as diving, moon-walking, etc.) and 7-Up advertising permeate the game. There's some strategy involved, such as bunching up like-colored discs in groups, and not moving too quickly to risk getting caught without a means to counter-attack. It's a simple game and may not hold interest for long (especially since it's only single games), but there are some nice options available to the player, such as timing moves for each player's moves, changing the CPU difficulty from one to five, being able to create a custom board, and up to four players tackling each other at once.

Reflections: The 7-Up Spot was popular for a few years in the late '80s and early '90s, about the same time that the Domino's Pizza Noid was around. I think Budweiser's Spuds MacKenzie was around that same time as well. It was the golden age of unnecessary cute corporate cash-ins. I type this as my rubber bendy Spot figure sits on my monitor. – PC



Spy Hunter

Genre: Shooter, Action
Release Date: Sept. 1987
Developer: Bally Midway
Ported by: Sunsoft
Publisher: Sunsoft
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

In this overhead vertical-scrolling driving/shooter hybrid, players take control of a weaponized sports car and hit the roads to take down enemies. These include blue Bulletproof Bullies, Tire Slashers, Limousines (which fire out the car's side window), as well as helicopters that drop explosives. Players must either avoid the enemies, ram them off the road, or destroy them via the car's machine guns or secondary weapons. Secondary weapons are obtained via weapons vans that appears regularly. If a player drives into the back of one, they will emerge with a limited amount of either a smoke-screen attack, oil slick, or missiles (useful for taking out the helicopters). The roads are also filled with pedestrian vehicles which must not be destroyed or else the player's score will stop increasing temporarily. Scoring more points will obtain extra lives to help to continue driving. As the roads cycle through different environments, such as a beach, snow roads, etc., the number of pedestrians will decrease and the number of enemies will increase. Gameplay is fast, challenging, and at times thrilling due to the speed of the game and the predicaments and choices the player will find themselves in. Success depends on having to speed up/down and attack and avoid enemies in quick succession, with some minor strategy involved. The potential monotony of the game is broken up by an optional, very difficult area where the player can choose to transform into a speed boat for a spell, and the game is backed by an excellent synth composition of the iconic theme to the television show *Peter Gunn*. All in all, this is a very good and faithful port of its arcade roots.

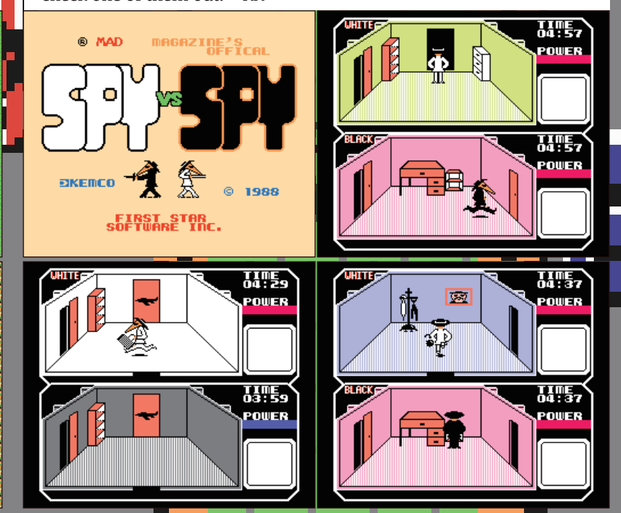
Reflections: *Spy Hunter* was one of the first games I owned when I received my NES for Christmas, along with *Ikari Warriors* and *Super Mario Bros.* My father must have noticed the amount of times I played the cockpit arcade version at Space Port at Woodbridge Center mall. That sit-down version of the game is a work of art, with a cool steering wheel with triggers, and a dashboard filled with lights and buttons for the car's weapons and weapons van. The James Bond influence of this game is undeniable, as the abilities of the G-6155 Interceptor of the game are obviously based upon the Aston Martin DB5 from the film *Goldfinger*. One of video games' earliest urban legends is that *Spy Hunter* has an ending, a falsehood spread around arcades and schoolyards alike. I've personally heard that you could fly a helicopter, turn into a motorcycle, and even get out of your car and fight enemy agents. While all are outstanding ideas, none are remotely true. It's unclear if these rumors were spread by those with wishful thinking or those playing a sick joke on others to trick them into playing a game for hours and hours until their eyes burned. – PC

Spy vs. Spy

Genre: Action
Release Date: Oct. 1988
Developer: First Star Software
Ported by: Kemco
Publisher: Kemco
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⯪

Based upon the *MAD Magazine* cartoon characters, here the Black and White spies rob and kill each other, with their own individual screens showing their location in the same embassy building. The object is to collect hidden items in the rooms in order and board your airplane before the timer runs out, using murderous tricks to beat your rival. The spies look accurate to their source material, snicker sometimes, and become angels when killed. But they're immortal; you only lose time and respawn. It's a simultaneous split-screen game and entirely consists of running through near-identical rooms in a grid pattern. You find key items by looking under/in furniture, but it isn't easy since you can only carry one at a time until you locate the briefcase. You'll have to hide some items to get later, but your opponent can steal them. If you try to leave without all the secret items you'll die. You can booby trap furniture and doors by collecting/activating traps, but they'll kill anyone who touches them – you and your opponent. Fortunately there are remedy items, like an umbrella that stops the water bucket door trap, as well as weapons. Traps kill instantly, and the life bar is for when the spies meet in the same room and brawl. One button cycles through your traps and map. This makes picking traps quick, but the map irritatingly covers the screen. Remembering objects and traps is important, but it's difficult when all the rooms look the same. It's challenging but frustratingly monotonous, with ugly colors and sound effects. There's a cutscene when levels end, but it changes little. The difficulty settings only add more rooms. However, there aren't many competitive, simultaneous two-player action NES games with a backstabbing premise. With human players the frustration will be mutual, and sometimes funny.

Reflections: Almost every episode of *MAD TV* seemed to have a *Spy vs. Spy* cartoon, in which the spies tried to outsmart one another in clever and absurd ways. The appeal of *Spy vs. Spy* is simple but also complex, since its cartoon violence is also creative: the spies' killing methods are never straightforward, and it's often a surprise which one of them ends up getting the last laugh. The first time I played the video game adaptation was on the Apple II, which is similar to the NES one but much slower and with a smaller resolution. *Spy vs. Spy* was released on many, many gaming platforms, virtually every one available in the mid '80s. Many of the other versions, including the Sega Master System one, look somewhat sharper. There is only one *Spy vs. Spy* game on the NES (plus another on Famicom), but on other platforms the game was so popular that there are three of these split-screen games in total. If you're a retro gaming or computing fan, check one of them out. – KN



Sqoon

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Sept. 1987
Developer: Home Data
Publisher: Irem
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★⯪

This bizarre underwater shooter starts with a unique premise: a pirate in his pink sub must save the Earth from Neptunian aliens who have melted the polar ice caps to flood the Earth on their quest to feed on humans, or "man-ham livestock" (got it)? In horizontal stages, players will shoot at attacking sea critters with missiles and aim at factory targets with ice bombs. One-hit deaths are the rule here, but players also have to watch out for fuel that runs out after a minute. Players can get more fuel by destroying a certain part of factories to unleash humans into the water. The player can grab them (as can the two killer whales that encircle the player). If the player destroys a crab, and can touch the glowing square before it turns back, a floating ferry will appear at the water's surface where the rescued humans can be dropped off in return for more fuel. If the player collects nine humans, a special ferry will automatically appear, and if the humans are dropped off, the player will receive a power-up (a more powerful missile and then spread-fire a second time). At the end of each level, players must destroy targets on a base to move on. There are some interesting sea enemies, such as sea-horses, snails, rock fish, etc., and at times they will litter the screen, making it hard to survive. Although the game looks a little primitive by some NES standards, and the challenge can be a little overwhelming, the unique gameplay and unbridled charm more than make up for the shortcomings.

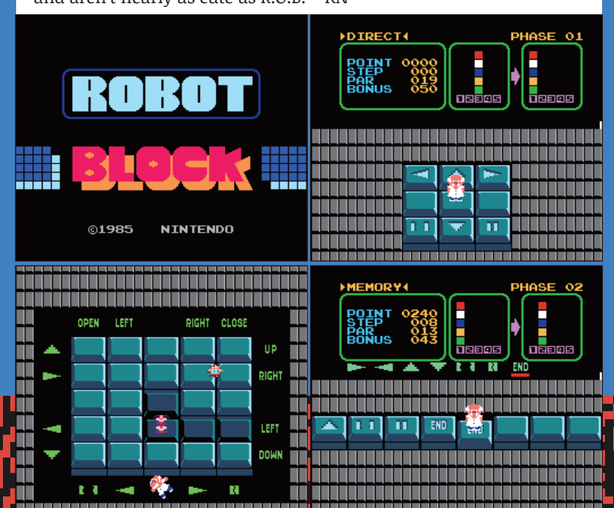
Reflections: What a trip of a game. The sense of humor and small touches really add a lot of character to a game that could have just been any other forgettable shooter. Aspects like the killer whales inexplicably accompanying you around (who can be killed, by the way), or the fact that the "hero" is a villain who reluctantly agrees to help, or the fact that a topless(!) mermaid appears at the end of each level (let alone the title screen). This game also has one of the worst instances of "NES slowdown" I have ever seen, as there is a point in the game where there are more than a dozen enemies flying quickly past at the same time – just a little too much for the ol' NES processor to handle. – PC

Stack-Up

Genre: Puzzle, Action
Release Date: Oct. 1985
Developer: Nintendo R&D1
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-2
Special Features: R.O.B. compatible, Edit Mode
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★⯪

In this game, compatible with the R.O.B. (Robotic Operating Buddy) accessory, you must set up him and his parts: hands, five trays, and five colored blocks. The "blocks" are stackable pucks that fit into the trays. The trays attach to R.O.B., like platforms. You control Professor Hector in the game, making him jump on buttons to make the screen flash, signaling commands to R.O.B. There are three game modes. In Direct you make R.O.B. rearrange blocks on his trays. The screen splits horizontally, with your score and block diagram on top and blue buttons on the bottom. The buttons make R.O.B. move his arms and hands. Set the blocks in the starting position, and then control R.O.B. and arrange them to match the diagram. It's broken into five phases, and you're scored on time. The Memory game is similar, except you program the commands first, then run them. You use a cursor with Hector to choose commands and Hector's jump speed. Bingo involves moving blocks too, but buttons cover the entire screen and you must avoid enemies. Pressing B pauses and shows the required block arrangement. Jump on all buttons in a horizontal or vertical row adjacent to the command you want. A creature called Flipper hits incorrect buttons, while Spike floats around. If you bump either, you're kicked off screen temporarily. In Two-Player Bingo, player two is Professor Vector and both players simultaneously try to make R.O.B. move blocks to his left or right. The player with the most blocks on his or her side wins. If R.O.B. drops blocks you have to start over, but it's your responsibility to play fairly. The volatile nature of the game and R.O.B. are unsatisfactory, but it's a great NES novelty.

Reflections: *Stack-Up* is one of the few games anywhere that requires tangible objects for play, but there's inherently an increased risk that your game will become incomplete or unplayable due to lost pieces. What if your R.O.B. gets lost, thrown, shot, or otherwise dies? What if you don't have enough blocks or the correct claw hand attachments? Then you can't play, and that's naturally how most R.O.B. units ended up. I confess that I reconstructed the R.O.B. experience from documentation and video playthroughs and I do not in fact own a working R.O.B. *Stack-Up* set. But then again, who does? (Don't answer that.) If you're interested in robots and retro gaming or computing, look for robots made by Androbot, Inc. and Axlon, two now defunct companies started by Atari founder Nolan Bushnell in the 1980s. These were more sophisticated robot buddies that could be programmed on home computers and moved around on wheels. They're interesting to read about, but almost impossible to acquire and aren't nearly as cute as R.O.B. – KN



Stadium Events

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Nov. 1987
Developer: TRY
Publisher: Bandai
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous), 1-6 (alternating)
Special Features: Power Pad (required)
Type: Licensed
Availability: Extremely Rare
★⯪

Prepare to run, and jump, and run some more in this third-person perspective, Olympics-style game using the Power Pad accessory. Players can stomp their feet to run and jump and compete in one of four events (100M Dash, 110M Hurdles, Triple Jump, Long Jump), one at a time or sequentially with the Olympics mode. Players compete one-on-one against increasingly more difficult opponents (with animal names) as players progress. The Tournament mode allows for up to eight human players to enter their names and compete against each other in these rudimentary mini-games. It's almost purely a Family Fun Fitness Pad/Power Pad tech demo, and the experience is about as deep as a puddle. Note: This game was later released as *World Class Track Meet* after Nintendo purchased the rights from Bandai and had all unsold copies of *Stadium Events* pulled from stores. Besides the different title screens, the games are identical.

Reflections: *Stadium Events* was published by Bandai to coincide with the release of their Family Fun Fitness Pad peripheral. After some months on the market, Nintendo purchased the rights to both the Fitness Pad (making it the Power Pad) as well as this title (renaming it *World Class Track Meet*). Because it was (allegedly) pulled from store shelves, *Stadium Events* today is the highest-priced game in the commercially released NES library, for the sole reason that it is hard to find, since not many people purchased the Family Fun Fitness Pad, and even less purchased this. There's no real videogame historical value, and it's certainly not fun past the one minute mark. Absolutely no one is seeking out this game and paying thousands in order to break out their Power Pad and awkwardly "run." If that was the case, they would just spend $1.99 and get *World Class Track Meet* instead. As someone who has spent a ridiculous amount of money on video games that others may find silly and/or crazy, I still respect and personally value this game as much as an empty bottle of Drano. – PC

Stanley: The Search For Dr. Livingston

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: Oct. 1992
Developer: Sculptured Software
Publisher: Electro Brain
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★★

Take control of Stanley in his search for the kidnapped explorer Dr. Livingston in this side-scrolling platform adventure. The huge African setting is presented beautifully with jungles, temples, native villages, and even tropical beaches. A detailed map screen is laid out in a grid which can be moved one square at a time. If a significant locale is uncovered, you play the area. If not, a random battle scenario begins, tasking the player with traversing to the other side of the screen while battling nasties. Exploring the stages to find a key unlocks the temple on each area of the map, opening the next section. The variety of enemies is impressive, from tigers, hissing snakes, spiders, mosquitoes, and native tribesmen to giant beetles and even flying tiki masks, with each area holding its own catalogue of critters. A wide range of moves are in place to assist our adventurer: jumping, crawling, grapple-hooking, and gyrocopter-hovering. An arsenal of weapons are available for defense. Stanley can initially punch, but enemies take many hits to kill (dropping precious health), so finding Stanley's missing machete really makes the difference. Other weapons such as spears and rocks round off a tightly-controlled character. As the game progresses, Stanley's strength, health, and defense can be increased via power-ups. At times enemies seem unfair, attacking from all angles, as Stanley can't attack directly upwards, but avoiding enemies completely is also an option (the gyrocopter is great for this and getting to hard-to-reach areas). The game has issues in scrolling vertically; for some reason it judders as though it was a single-screen game, which can become jarring at times, occasionally causing death to our intrepid explorer. The difficulty is never unfair, however, but always a challenge in this excellent sprawling quest. The fun renders any small annoyances pointless in this jungle gem.

Reflections: When first playing, I expected a humdrum average platformer with little redeeming features and was gleefully surprised. The sheer size of the game is hugely impressive and the variety of stages kept me hooked. Add in the reward of exploration with power-ups and items and there always felt like there was something to do. The gyrocopter was a neat homage to *H.E.R.O* on the Atari 2600 and was put to good use avoiding enemies and saving yourself from falling to the death. Punching a hilarious flying tiger felt pretty satisfying, though without power-ups it took forever smacking even the simplest of creatures' faces in. It is a shame no one talks about this game, as I have found a new fondness for it. – JE

Star Force

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Nov. 1987
Developer: Tecmo
Publisher: Tecmo
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

In this overhead vertical shooter, players guide the Final Star through 24 areas to take down the evil Gordess. The environments seem to be space stations, which the player flies above (the ground scrolls nicely left to right following the player) to take out ground targets and bonus targets for points. Players are equipped with primary fire only, as they weave in out of waves of simple fighters who will shoot back. Fortunately, they come in quickly and in interesting patterns, forcing players to be on their toes in countering the many projectiles that can be incoming at one time. The most interesting common enemy is the Obsess, a land mine that will track the player and increase speed, and if shot will explode into four projectiles. This enemy comes in groups and will test the player's skill, and may require the player to use the advanced technique of destroying the enemy by touching them with the side wing while firing. Bosses at the end of the areas are simple, large floating fortresses who are too easy to defeat, since they do not fire back at the player. A single power-up is available, which extends the ship while speeding it up and providing helpful turbo fire. There's some nice shooter fun to be had here, even if it lacks some complexity and frills that would show up in the genre later.

Reflections: *Star Force* laid the groundwork way back in 1984 for a lot of shooters to follow. Elements like ground targets and enemy bosses didn't really exist before in the shooter genre. While there were no secondary weapons here, you still have to give Tecmo credit for pushing forward the shooter genre the way they did. – PC

Star Soldier

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Jan. 1989
Developer: Hudson Soft
Publisher: Taxan
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★½

In this basic vertically-scrolling shooter (which spawned a long running series), the player takes control of the ship Caesar and is tasked with gunning down waves of enemies and the occasional mid-boss as they approach Star Brain, the final enemy for each stage. Mid-bosses are terrifying, large blue faces that form from four chunks that come in at different angles. The main ships themselves are interesting as well, taking on the semblance of snails and a little-known ship called the *Enterprise* (among other odd designs). The levels look like space stations in the middle of construction, and blasting various blocks will expose tons of items for bonus points. However, actual power-ups, like a rapid canon that can end up firing in five directions, are sparse. In a neat touch, the player can fly under certain segments of the background to dodge out of battle with particularly tricky enemy waves, although sometimes this occurs at very inopportune times. While the game is simple and lacking variety, it's very well-put together and a great choice for any shooter fan needing a quick fix.

Reflections: This is where my love of shooters begins. As a kid I was initially wary to blow a rare rental on something so difficult and arcade-like, but I soon found myself falling victim to the "just one more play" trap. The blue face that forms as a mid-boss in some levels is terrifyingly awesome! This game was heavily inspired by *Star Force*. – IF

Star Trek: 25th Anniversary

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: Feb. 1992
Developer: Interplay Productions
Publisher: Ultra Games
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

After the starship *Enterprise* is hurled to an uncharted region of space, it's up to you to direct Captain James T. Kirk and crew to repair the ship and discover the mystery behind a dimensional gate. You'll use the *Enterprise* to fly from planet to planet (with some ship battles with the Romulans thrown in for good measure), and construct a landing party to roam around. This consists of choosing a party of three crew members: Kirk, and two others from a group of Spock, McCoy, and a host of red-shirt crewmen with different specializations. After beaming down, you'll move around the area in a top-down perspective to seek out new items and clues that will propel you along your quest. In addition to talking to the local civilizations, you can also take readings of objects via tricorder, and stun/kill enemies with your phaser – though fighting is not the optimal solution to any given problem in the game. Some gameplay aspects can be annoying, such as the two non-Kirk members of your landing party walking around seemingly at random and getting stuck behind obstacles. However, the good does outweigh the bad, especially if you enjoy *Star Trek* and/or adventure games. Fans of the former will find many references to episodes from the original series, most notably the mob planet from "A Piece of the Action." Fans of the latter will find some interesting puzzles that require critical thinking to get by, such as beaming down the correct specialists to help Kirk out on planets where Spock and McCoy don't have the necessary skills. Either way, the developers did their homework enough to make this a decent, if otherwise unremarkable game.

Reflections: I've been a fan of *Star Trek* for a long time, but the original series was never exactly my cup of tea. Having said that, I'm familiar enough with the source material to really appreciate the effort put into connecting this game to the series, and making it feel as if it could have easily been a canonical story from the *Enterprise*'s five year mission. For the most part, the game takes the form of an adventure not unlike the Lucasarts games of the time period, but without a point-and-click interface or nearly as many commands available. As with many adventure games on the NES, the limited control scheme can hold the game back and make it somewhat cumbersome, but not enough to put off patient fans of Kirk's adventures. – JD

Star Trek: The Next Generation

Genre: Action, Simulation
Release Date: Sept. 1993
Developer: Imagineering
Publisher: Absolute Entertainment
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★

This space simulation game puts you in charge of the starship *Enterprise* from the titular sci-fi television show. The structure of the game is mission based, and after you are briefed on your objective at the beginning of a stage, you're given control of the ship's various systems and the familiar cast members who crew them. This includes Data at Ops, Worf at Tactical, and so on. Depending on the nature of your mission, you'll need to utilize several of the ship's systems to meet your goal, with each taking on a different gameplay element. Ship combat, for example, is a first-person, quasi-3D shooter where you navigate the ship and fire weapons at enemy vessels, while engineering can be used to either fix damaged systems or boost their power by guiding a spark through a maze-like puzzle. In the end, this is a remedial simulation game. Though there is the illusion of options available to you, you're pretty much on rails as you're guided through a mission system by system. But while utilizing the ship's different systems provides some variety to the gameplay, this is at heart a glorified battle simulator, as diplomacy is not even an option for diffusing a given situation. This is not strictly speaking a bad game, and fans of the show will enjoy the references laid throughout, but the player may be left wanting more depth to the proceedings.

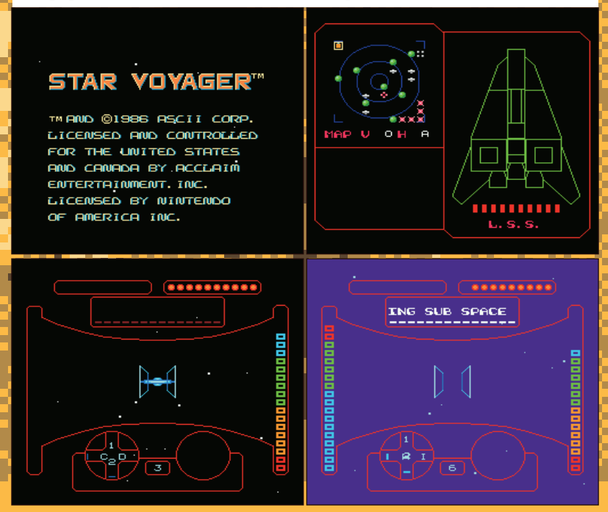
Reflections: As a fan of *Star Trek*, and *The Next Generation* in particular, I'm especially disappointed in the interesting gameplay elements that are only touched upon here. By 1993, most developers had figured out how to squeeze the most out of the system, but this is one of the late life-cycle games that is truly lacking. I would play this game as a kid on my Game Boy (where the game was ported almost exactly one-for-one) and feel like it was a fun game for maybe 10 to 15 minutes, but then quickly becomes tedious as the thin mechanics repeat and become wearisome. At least the other *Star Trek* game on the NES was ambitious in its scope. After revisiting this title as an adult, I can't say my feelings have changed. – JD

Star Voyager

Genre: Shooter, Simulation
Release Date: Sept. 1987
Developer: ASCII
Publisher: Acclaim Entertainment
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

In this space shooter/simulator, you play as a starfighter pilot that must protect your civilization's only colony ship, the CosmoStation Noah, from a group of terrorists known as the Molok Wardrivers. You alone will need to destroy all enemy fleets before they reach the Noah. This all takes place in a sector of space that includes several planets, space stations, and even a black hole, which you'll have to navigate around on your way to dogfights with the enemy. It all sounds rather interesting, but the limited controls and ambiguous information on the screen can make the game rather arcane unless you know exactly what you're doing. For starters, to warp to a different region of space, you must first move your cursor to the destination on the navigation screen, return to pilot mode, and hold down B until you are in the red portion of the speedometer (left side meter, not marked). Then, when the warp meter (upper left meter, also not marked) has enough charge to match the warp distance to your destination (lower middle meter, also not marked), you hit B again to bring speed to full and warp. But don't stop holding the button until you reach your destination, at which point your energy reserves (right and upper right meters... not marked) might be low. And then the real action begins if you hit an enemy, dogfighting with lasers and shields activated. It's complicated and difficult to pick up from just playing the game, with the instruction manual being a must here. Not paying attention to your energy meter, and failing to refuel at space stations will mean a quick end to your exploits. There are annoying points, in addition to the steep learning curve, that hold this game back. These include an aggravating collection of sound effects and punishing difficulty. But if you can figure out the esoteric nature of the game, there is some fun to be had here – a resource management system, the ability to explore planets for helpful technology, and simple 3D space combat that make for an interesting and unique entry to the NES library.

Reflections: There is a lot of ambition in this game, and I greatly respect that. However, I'm willing to bet that 90 percent of kids who bought or rented this game in the '80s spent a grand total of 10 minutes trying to figure it out before controllers were thrown in frustration. Despite that, my respect for what was attempted here made it worth some extra effort on my part to figure out how the clunky interface and control scheme worked. Even if you were one of those frustrated '80s kids, try this one again with an eye out for an online guide or instruction manual. Once you understand more about its intent, *Star Voyager* is much better than its first impression. – JD



Star Wars

Genre: Action-Platformer, Shooter
Release Date: Nov. 1991
Developer: Beam Software
Publisher: JVC
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★⯪

This adaptation of the blockbuster fantasy film follows the movie's plot fairly closely. Starting on Tatooine as Luke Skywalker, players navigate a landspeeder in overhead perspective to go to caves to be explored in a standard platformer mode. These caves contain enemies such as droids, jawas, and sand people, and the objective is to find shield icons for the Millennium Falcon as well as companions R2-D2 and Obi-Wan Kenobi to join your party. Luke starts with a weak blaster for attacking, but after finding Kenobi will be given a more powerful lightsaber which can also block incoming fire. After traveling to Mos Eisley and finding Han Solo, that character is then selectable with a more powerful blaster and an independent health meter. After a first-person perspective level of flying the Falcon through an asteroid belt, players will have to rescue Princess Leia in the Death Star, a labyrinth of elevators filled with deadly stormtroopers. After escaping, it's two more first-person flying levels, first on the Falcon shooting down TIE Fighters and then in an X-Wing doing the same. Finally, a nice and tense overhead-shooter level occurs where Luke has to maneuver around obstacles and fire a proton torpedo to blow up the Death Star. The shooter levels look and feel great, requiring good reflexes to keep up with the extreme difficulty. The platformer sections, however, do not fare as well. They eschew combat for exploration, with ladders and air columns that fling the player up to other stage areas. Unfortunately, trial-and-error deaths occur often, with many pits and instant-death spikes both on the ground and ceilings, and even falling a short distance will drain the player's energy. Even though there are health power-ups and players can switch between Luke, Han, and Leia, enemies are overpowered and can take many hits before being destroyed (some cannot be harmed at all). Thankfully, via the menu, Obi-Wan can replenish health of the heroes and even restore the lives of Han and Leia up to five times. There's much to admire: the controls are very sound, with the ability to run and jump longer distances, nice graphics, and the soundtrack from the film is recreated. It's just a shame that the action elements of the platforming stages are unfairly balanced and not very fun.

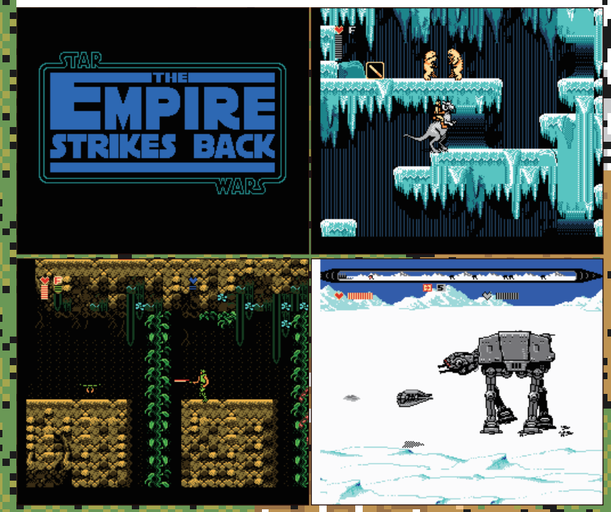
Reflections: The NES library would be remiss if it contained adaptations of schlocky movies like *Cool World* but not of one of the most popular films ever. And you know what? It's not a complete disaster! Sure, the weapons you use are as powerful as spit balls, but it's *Star Wars*! For those import fans out there, Namco put out a completely different (and superior) version of the game on the Famicom. I actually had a pretty big *Star Wars* toy collection from my teen years up until my 20s when I sold off 95 percent of it. Why did I sell? *The Phantom Menace*, that's why. – PC

Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back

Genre: Action-Platformer, Shooter
Release Date: Mar. 1992
Developer: Lucasfilm Games, Sculptured Software
Publisher: JVC
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

This game adaptation follows the plot of the smash sequel to *Star Wars*. Players control Luke Skywalker and guide him through the events of the film. Play begins on planet Hoth, with Luke riding a Tauntaun (he can jump off and on it) and armed with a blaster. In the very expansive levels, it can be easy to get lost, with many paths that lead to either dead-ends or power-ups, and only one path out. After finding the much more powerful lightsaber early on, Luke can switch to and use that melee weapon. The controls are fine when attacking, with the ability to fire and strike in multiple directions, but the very quick jumping can take getting used to. There's also the ability to crouch and charge for a much higher jump to reach areas. Hearts to restore health and other pick-ups are available, including eight different Force powers that can be used at any time, as long as the Force meter is not empty. These include the ability to strengthen the lightsaber, strengthen the blaster, levitate, heal, and more. Using these powers is essential to get through tough areas, avoiding enemies where need be (since they can be overwhelming), and easily tearing through overpowered mini-bosses and end bosses using the strengthened lightsaber/blaster, since they do little damage against boss characters normally. The enemies are great and stem from the movie's environments: for example, stormtroopers, probe-bots, and Wampa creatures on Hoth, various swamp creatures on Dagobah (where Yoda resides), and stormtroopers, Ugnaughts, and even bounty hunters like Boba Fett at Cloud City, and of course Darth Vader. The platforming levels may seem daunting, since some require some rudimentary puzzle solving, for example finding and commandeering an AT-ST walker to take out force fields to move on. Interspersed with the platforming levels are a few shooter ones, including a rousing battle against AT-ATs on Hoth (both in and out of the Snowspeeder), and an X-Wing battle at Cloud City. The presentation is a bit mixed here, with the graphics being above average but not great, but with outstanding voice and sound samples pulled directly from the film for the tiny cutscenes. While some may be turned off by the difficulty balance, which can swing too wildly in places, the experience as a whole does the movie enough justice to recommend.

Reflections: This is one of those times where I honestly could have rated the game higher or lower depending on my mood. It's just a shame though that other characters, like my favorite, Han Solo, aren't playable. Ah well. At the end of the game, the credits say to watch out for the *Return of the Jedi*. It never happened on the NES. Oops. However, the development team that worked on this title would go on to work on the brilliant SNES *Star Wars* game trilogy. – PC

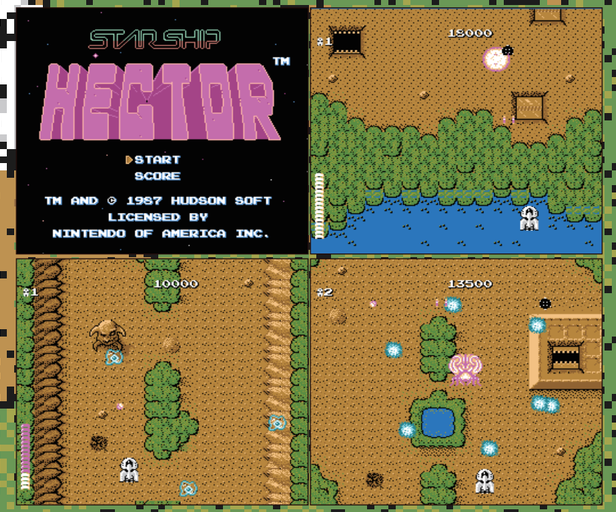


Starship Hector

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: June 1990
Developer: Hudson Soft
Publisher: Hudson Soft
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

Starship Hector must defeat the Bio-Mechanical Creatures to save the Earth in this combination horizontal/vertical shooter. The starship is armed with lasers to attack in the air and bombs to drop on ground targets. In vertically scrolling stages (1, 3, 5), several ground targets will usually be firing at the player at the same time they are being swarmed by aerial enemies. It's essential that targets are taken out as soon as possible, since many will fire deadly spread shots, filling the air with so many sprites that "NES slowdown" can occur. Players have a health bar that seems to drain pretty quickly when hit with enemy fire. However, having a craft run into the player will result in massive damage and most of the time, instant death. Statues will dispense health power-ups if bombed a few times, which are very helpful, since losing a ship pushes you back to the beginning of the stage. Unfortunately, the player's attack is very underpowered, requiring multiple hits for most enemies. This isn't as glaring in the vertical stages, but exposes the game in the horizontal ones (2, 4, 6), since there is a lot less room to move, and too many Kamikaze-style enemies that can destroy the ship quickly by running into it. Boss battles are mixed as well, with nice designs but are overly drawn-out encounters, with usually a few shots on the player frustratingly sending them back to the beginning of the level. Although the optional two- and five-minute score attack modes are nice, the lack of weapon power-ups and sufficient shields really hampers the entire experience, as technically sound as it may be.

Reflections: The starship *Hector* looks similar in design to the starship *Enterprise*, and I wonder if that was Hudson's Soft way of inferring that some sort of Federation exists in their game, somehow. The background story is that the Hector was thousands of light years away on an exploration mission before coming back home and finding the Earth overrun. It's actually not a terrible idea for a television or movie plot, the more I think about it. Where was I? Oh, the difficulty. When your game makes *Life Force* look easy, maybe you should tweak the challenge a little bit. – PC

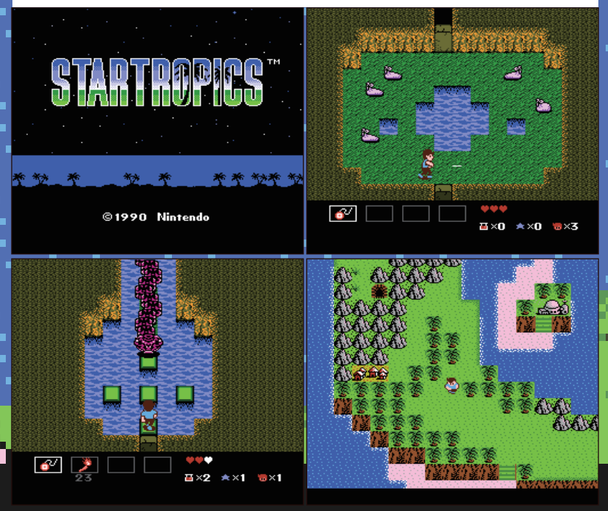


StarTropics

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: Dec. 1990
Developer: Nintendo R&D3
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

Mixing action, adventure, and RPG elements, this game's a rich experience. Teenager Mike visits the tropical C-Island to see his uncle, but said uncle's been kidnapped! Thus Mike embarks on his journey, carrying a deadly... yo-yo. The overworld map has RPG-esque "chibi"-style sprites and there's a separate battle environment with normal proportions. Both are in overhead perspective and move on a grid, so the controls aren't very responsive; they're precise, but stiff. This may be a dealbreaker for some players. However, it improves once you learn the game's rhythm and patterns of enemies, which include slugs, snakes, mummies, and weirder monsters like ostriches with human skulls. Some take multiple hits, so destroying them with your short-range yo-yo or avoiding them is essential. There are tiles on the floor throughout the game which can be jumped on as platforms or to activate hidden switches for opening doors and secrets. But falling off disappearing tiles and into pits will kill you more than enemies. There is a save feature and you'll need it due to the difficulty. Most challenges are fair, but sometimes you must memorize traps that you cannot detect at first, like doors that lead to instant death pits. Despite health and weapon upgrades, fighting gets harder and dungeons become labyrinthine, with tile puzzles to solve to find exits. Yet exploration is often rewarded. Clearing a room of enemies can open exits, but switches might reveal more. The music is memorable and has an appropriate "island" theme. With plentiful dialogue and characters, the story is complex for the NES. Like many action-RPGs, you spend the game fetching items for people so they'll help you: fortune teller lost her crystal ball, you go find it. These quests become progressively more significant, leading to a satisfying conclusion.

Reflections: Around 1996, I found a copy of *StarTropics* at a community yard/garage sale. The NES' value was just beginning to depreciate then, and every other house had at least a few cartridges for sale. I paid about $15 for *StarTropics*, which was worth it to me because I already knew it was good. However, it didn't include the manual, which is a big problem. Unfortunately, there's a part in the game where you must use the manual to find a secret message in order to progress. Retrieving the manual or the secret from the internet was not an option at the time. I later wrote a letter to Nintendo of America asking for the information. Some weeks later, I got an envelope from Nintendo containing my letter and a brand-new copy of the manual! I hadn't expected that. They had no obligation whatsoever to give me a free manual for a secondhand copy of a years-old game on a system they no longer supported. Yet they did. Although my opinion of Nintendo has fluctuated over the years depending on their products, I still haven't forgotten their inexplicably kind act. – KN



Stealth ATF

Genre: Shooter, Simulation
Release Date: Oct. 1989
Developer: Imagineering
Publisher: Activision
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

Piloting a Lockheed F-117 Nighthawk, players travel worldwide to destroy enemy fighters. First is a brief about the mission's location and objective, as well as a colorful comment, such as "Bring honor to the squadron." Next, the player takes off by pressing the A button. The screen is now split horizontally, with the view from the cockpit on top. Below, the instrument panel shows the number of lives, enemies, missiles, score, and the mission number. It also has a radar scope to track bogeys and readings for altitude, fuel, heading, angle of attack and damage sustained. When enemies come into the sights, they can be blasted with rapid cannon fire or missiles (eight per mission), and their return fire can be avoided by climbing, banking and flipping. If the mission is completed unscathed, a timed bonus round begins where players can down unarmed fighters for more points. Finally, there is the landing, which is frustratingly difficult. Even if all enemies are successfully destroyed, a crash landing forces the mission to restart. Each mission gets progressively harder by adding more bogeys, which makes gameplay both tense and repetitive, as little else changes each time. There are some different background colors and textures, but these, as well as the obnoxiously infectious music tracks, eventually repeat. This game is still worth a try, if only to see the mission brief comments and game over taunts, which are lovingly crafted from Air Force hot shot clichés: "Not bad for a rookie fighter jock."

Reflections: As I played this game, crashing many times for each successful landing, I kept wondering what my father, who was a pilot, would think. Would he have a better time with it? Or would his expertise cause him to find more issues than I recognized? I wish I could ask him, but he passed away when I was a kid. Even though this wasn't my favorite game to play, it made me think of my dad in a way I hadn't before. I really appreciate it for that. It goes to show that good can be found in the most unlikely of places – so never stop looking for it. – AP

Stinger

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Sept. 1987
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Konami
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★

In the *Stinger* ship, players must rescue Dr. Cinnamon from the alien Attackons. This cute and colorful shooter consists of both vertical and horizontal stages where players have to take out bugged-eye and cartoony enemies on both land and in the air. Players are given a primary attack and a secondary attack which targets the ground (vertical stages) and clouds above (horizontal stages). The clouds and some enemies contain power-up bells which when shot continually will bounce and change color correlating to a power-up or score bonus. They can be collected any time or shot further to transform them. Power-ups include ship speed increases, laser beam fire, a twin shooter, and attached clone ships which also fire. The gimmick though is that selecting the appropriate power-up amounts to shooting and juggling the same bell a dozen times or more to switch to the appropriate power-up color between the colored bells that simply award bonus points. It can be both fun and annoying/dangerous trying to do that while avoiding enemies and their fire. Additional power-ups are available via ground targets destroyed. Gameplay is smooth and the difficulty is just the right amount to keep things interesting but not frustrating. Two-player simultaneous mode is available as well for a good time.

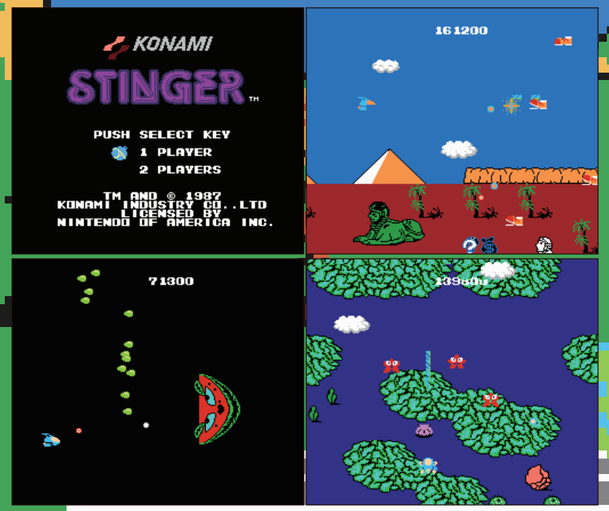
Reflections: This was released as the second *TwinBee* game in Japan for those keeping track. What I always remembered as a kid was seeing this advertised in the fold-out Konami poster that came with the other games, and being confused as hell seeing a bubble spaceship with boxing gloves. The cover art depicts three different ships, since the Japanese version offered up to three players at once. I can see all you readers out there pretending to find that fact interesting. – PC

Street Cop

Genre: Action
Release Date: June 1989
Developer: Sonata
Publisher: Bandai
Players: 1
Special Features: Power Pad (required)
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★

Using the Power Pad, players take control of a police officer named Little Ben who's out to take out criminals by beating them. Gameplay takes place in side-scrolling view, and using the Power Pad players can move up/down on screen, jump, turn, and walk or run in either direction. Players have a time limit to take down a certain number of criminals in each stage by hitting them with their baton or using one of several obtainable secondary weapons, like throwing a "can of coke" or firing a pistol. There's a map screen to help, showing both the player's location and the criminal's. After hitting the criminal, they will disappear and the next one will randomly pop up elsewhere on the map. It's a kitschy, fun concept. However, the complexity of moving with the Power Pad in changing direction, moving up/down, going around corners, and entering buildings is very cumbersome and would have been best served to have some functions mapped to the controller, instead of only the weapons. The graphics are pretty good, with cute characters that are juxtaposed greatly against the violence on screen. The level of enjoyment of this somehow charming game here will depend almost solely on how well you get used to the control scheme. If you do so, you'll be committing police brutality while listening to soothing, melodic music in no time.

Reflections: This is a title that if I knew how to control better, I would play all the way through at least once a year on principle alone. It's not like there were many Power Pad games released in the United States, so this automatically is the most interesting one on paper. Nowadays, Little Ben would probably be wearing a body camera, and everyone has a camera phone, so beating on purse snatchers with a baton would probably be out of the question. Other offenders in the game include a female knife-throwing gang leader, a mafia boss, an ex-football player suffering from post-concussion syndrome, and my favorite, a guy who eats at fast food restaurants and leaves without paying. If there ever was someone who deserved to be beaten with a phone book, there he is. – PC



Street Fighter 2010: The Final Fight

Genre: Action, Fighting
Release Date: Sept. 1990
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★

This is an interesting take on the action genre that plays out as a series of boss fights. Players take control of Ken (Kevin Striker in the Japanese version) and must destroy a main enemy in each combat arena before finding a portal and progressing to the next level. Ken is a fairly acrobatic guy, certainly by 8-bit standards, and can jump, wall grab, backflip, and even curve the short range projectiles fired from his extremities via punching and kicks. Some levels are larger, with multiple platforms and small drone enemies to contend with in addition to the main baddie, while others are tiny flat affairs with just the player and the boss squaring off. Several power-ups are available and important to success, including capsules to extend the range and strength of projectile attacks. However, when losing a life, Ken's attacks will be back to where he started, making it difficult to lose a life later in the game. Another issue is that the time allotted to find the portal to the next level is limited and expires far too quickly to be fair for players who have not yet memorized their locations. Still, the feel is unlike any standard fighting game, so it's worth it to try some futuristic fisticuffs.

Reflections: It's easy for many to see this as a cash in on *Street Fighter*'s popularity, but at the time this was released part II hadn't even hit arcades yet. The main character's name change for U.S. markets is still likely meant to make it relatable to the *Street Fighter* universe, but since the first game in the series didn't exactly burn up arcades, I see the change as harmless, not nefarious. This is truly a decent game if one leaves preconceived notions behind, as the idea of boss-rush games and modes is quite common in the scrolling-shooter genre. – IF

Strider

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: July 1989
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

As an elite member of the world's foremost secret maneuvers group, the Strider "Hiryu" has been tasked with an urgent mission: to locate and murder a fellow agent! Quietly questioning this mysterious objective, Hiryu sets off to find his comrade in this kinetic action-platforming adventure. The story unfolds as Hiryu finds keys to open specific doors and message disks that contain intelligence vital to his mission. Exploration is the name of the game, with clues and information obtained by destroying certain enemies and meeting with NPCs that offer assistance. Robotic gun turrets, futuristic samurai, and other bloodthirsty foes are out to murder the courageous operative, but in addition to wielding his deadly Cipher weapon, learning "Power Tricks" can help Hiryu out of tight spots. These special techniques include a powerful fire bullet and an awesome super jump. Finding special gear such as the Magnet Boots and Aqua Boots also opens up previously inaccessible areas. Backtracking is an important part of this adventure, so it's vital to note whenever a level can't be fully explored, as Hiryu will likely need to return once he obtains a specific item or skill. Hiryu's mission takes him to locales including Africa, Japan, and Egypt, where he braves lethal locations including deadly pyramids and a weaponized train. The control is nuanced, as Hiryu is capable of running, jumping, sliding, crouching and performing an acrobatic wall jump. The graphics are good, with some striking enemy designs and a unique mixture of environments. The dark tone lends itself well to a futuristic story riddled with plot twists and intrigue. Hiryu is certainly operating in a shadowy world, but here's hoping that he can take it all in stride.

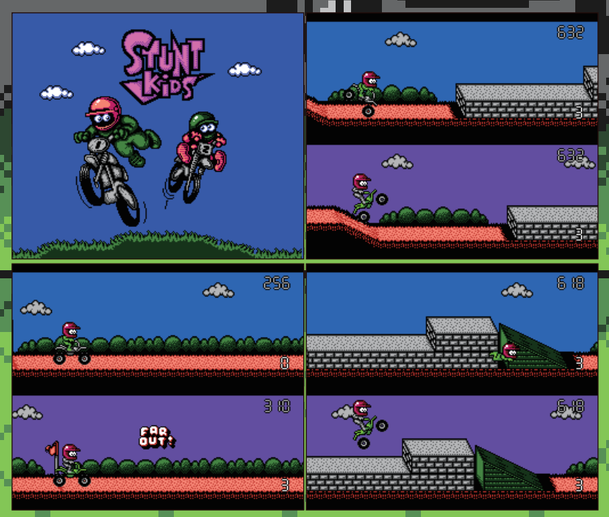
Reflections: Sorry, *Lord of the Rings* fans, this game doesn't center on the character in the classic fantasy novels. Our story features a young, ninja-like operative who is part of a clandestine paramilitary strike group. Hiryu is an amazingly agile, high-jumping, Cipher blade-slashing, futuristic hero on a covert mission! I think Strider Hiryu actually makes the Tolkien Strider look seriously boring in comparison! *Strider* was originally released by Capcom in arcades as an action-platformer in 1989, with the NES release following shortly afterwards. If you're looking for the purer slashing version on a console, check out the excellent Sega Genesis port from 1990. – DM

Stunt Kids

Genre: Racing
Release Date: 1992
Developer: Codemasters
Publisher: Camerica
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★

This off-road motorcycle race takes place traveling from left-to-right in split screen mode against an opponent on the same course. There are five different worlds, with six possible courses in each. Players have a time limit they must beat to get to the end of the course. To do so, they must navigate ramps, obstacles, animals, and more without crashing, which takes valuable time off the clock. Controls are not intuitive and take some getting used to. RIGHT accelerates, LEFT brakes, UP lifts the front wheel to help get up higher parts of courses and to get bigger jumps off ramps, and DOWN points the front wheel down and raises the rear. A jumps and B uses a turbo boost, which are limited. The main issue here is that since the character and course are large, the player cannot see far enough ahead to really plan to speed up or slow down to avoid incoming obstacles, and going at full speed will only work so much until hitting something. When restarting, depending on the position, the player can easily crash or be thrown off the bike at least once again, really slowing down the action and destroying any chance to finish the race. It's not impossible, but it's too frustrating to want to master, if that's even possible without having every nook and cranny of each race track pre-memorized.

Reflections: *Stunt Kids* was the only game out of 770 or so that we did not play during the original 31-hour First Annual NES Marathon. My game cart had a corrupted ROM apparently, so I did not have a replacement until the next year, when it was one of the first games Ian and I played for the second marathon. We didn't feel so bad then for missing out on the hot stunt action. When the highlight of the game is the goofy, bug-eyed driver in his "stunt truck" driving to the race at the beginning, it's safe to say that Camerica's "Absolutely Brilliant" opening slogan should have been removed from the game. – PC

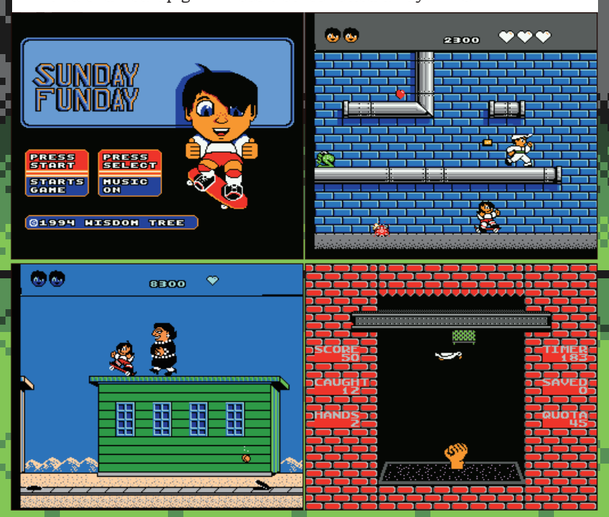


Sunday Funday: The Ride

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: 1995
Developer: Color Dreams, Wisdom Tree
Publisher: Wisdom Tree
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Rare
★★

The player is late for Sunday school, and they have to get there by traversing beach town stages, piers, and sewers. The player travels on a skateboard, which is a little slippery in controlling, as it's somewhat momentum based. When jumping, hitting A in the air will slightly hop the board, extending the length and times of jumps. Enemies such as bullies, clowns dropping balloons, tough beach guys, plumbers, frogs, birds, and humorously oversized men must be dealt with. The player is armed with a short spinning attack, as well as a spinning attack while jumping. The hit detection for connecting with an enemy is poor, as it seems almost random whether or not damage is done to them, or if it is done to the player. The player has a few hearts as a life meter, but can find more in levels to replenish, although there are too few scattered around. Some objects are thrown at the player, such as newspapers and grapefruit bombs. They may be picked up and thrown at enemies, and in the case of the oversized enemies, the bomb is the only way to defeat them. Gameplay usually consists of skating along until coming to an enemy or pair that must be defeated before moving on again. In between levels, you get to see cutscenes of your Sunday school teacher egging you on to get to class while providing advice for the next level. The poor hit detection and subpar controls make it a chore to play in the pier and beach town levels, but they pale in comparison to the horrible sewer sections. These contain landmines, light switches that blacken the level, and annoying springboards that shoot the player around the screen, sometimes into water pits. The controls are insufficient to handle such platforming elements without a lot of trial and error. Two other game modes are offered. *Fishfall* is a simple game where the player must catch falling fish with a hand and then throw them up to a basket to be caught. There's also a karaoke mode where you can sing "The Ride," a song by the Christian band 4HIM. This title is a cobbled-together experience, with only the barest of religious relevance.

Reflections: This is a reskinned version of the Color Dreams game *Menace Beach*. Nothing says "Christianity" quite like using explosives to blow the heads off of oversized people on the street. According to the manual, the enemies are simply ordinary folks who want you to hang out and surf, or work on the Sabbath, all in a nefarious plot to miss Sunday school. This is widely recognized as the last commercially produced NES game released in North America during the system's life span of 1985–1995. The system went out with a religious whimper, to say the least. Many of these carts exist sealed and unopened, due to a lot of new old stock from Wisdom Tree that was never sold and later available directly to the secondary market. Did the Christian gaming crowd stay away from this game since they knew it was based on one with a chained-up girl whose clothes rotted away? – PC

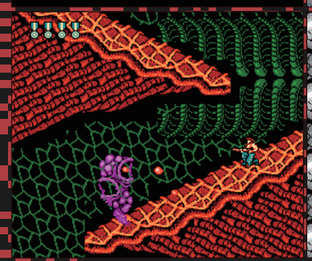


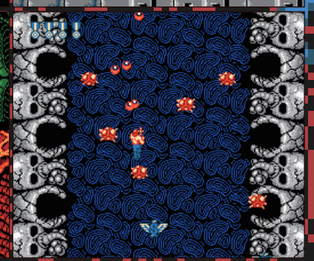
Super C

Probotector II: Return of the Evil Forces *(PAL)*
Genre: Run and Gun Shooter
Release Date: Apr. 1990
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Konami
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★★

Soldiers Bill and Lance return to take on the alien menace Red Falcon once again in this action-packed shooter sequel. The game takes place across a variety of side-scrolling run and gun levels mixed with top-down, multi-directional shooter ones. The game plays quickly and hard with one-hit kills, limited lives, and continues sending you back to the beginning of the stage. Emphasis is placed on learning the game's patterns from enemy placement, bullet patterns, and where each power-up is located. Power-ups are essential and unfortunately some are simply not as good as others. The flamethrower/exploding fireball weapon may look cool and the rapid-fire machine gun may be a welcome relief from the standard weapon, but it's really the spread shot that helps players most effectively deal with waves of oncoming soldiers. The top-down segments aren't nearly as well-designed or as much fun as the side-scrolling segments, but they don't ruin the game. Level progression is fun and interesting as players go from basic military bases and jungles into alien-infested territory. Enemies also get more "out there" and creative when the standard soldiers are replaced by purple blobs and grimacing skull monsters. Simultaneous co-op play is a blast as each player helps the other take down the enemy swarm in what adds up to a very pure and arcade-like experience. Minor gripes like weapon balance and some disappointingly boring bosses aside, this is a tense, fun shooter that stands up to some of the best on the system.

Reflections: This was never as popular as the original and I think there are a couple reasons why. The game becomes even more difficult than the original in later levels and the first wasn't known for being a cake walk. Most importantly, the level design never feels as creative or as interesting as *Contra*. There are no cool Waterfall or Snow Field levels, and while the overhead levels may be a bit more conventional, I find myself missing the third-person, over-the-shoulder levels of the original, as there was really nothing else like them. – IF





Super Cars

Genre: Racing
Release Date: Feb. 1991
Developer: Gremlin Graphics
Publisher: Electro Brain
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★

This top-down view racing game features many courses, cars to buy, and power-ups that are available. The sheer amount of offerings to start is surprisingly robust. Players race through each class by taking on opponents on a variety of tracks before moving on to a more difficult set of opponents. Winnings from each race can be used to repair various types of damage sustained and also to buy speed kits, armor, and even rear or forward-firing missiles. The game sets itself up nicely, but problems and cracks in the framework expose themselves quickly. Courses are long and require many laps, often five, and on the slower levels this results in particularly boring and drawn-out races. Collision detection is unforgiving, and even the slightest crash will cause the cars to slow drastically. This makes any sort of jockeying for position on the often narrow straightaways nearly impossible, as there is usually only an insanely precise gap one can fit themselves in to take the lead. Additionally, the amount of speed lost by nudging against curbs and corners is extreme. These concrete borders are the worst, as it's entirely possible to get hung up on one while visually no part of the player's car is touching, resulting in a constant bumping over and over as players try to pull away. Graphics are serviceable but plain, and the music is about as monotonous as everything else. Initially these problems are easy to work around, but as the difficulty ramps up, frustration sets in and this title will likely get shelved. It's a shame because the framework for a solid arcade racer is here.

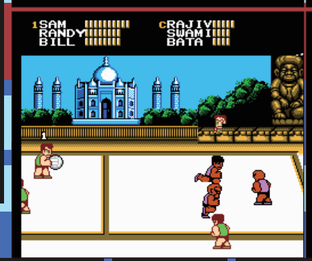
Reflections: I adore racing games of this sort, so it was upsetting to see it go from good to bad pretty quickly. The earlier and more simplistic *Super Sprint* gives a general idea of how this game plays while also being exponentially more fun. – IF

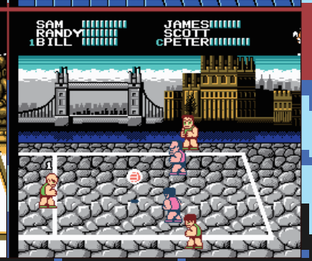
Super Dodge Ball

Genre: Action, Sports
Release Date: June 1988
Developer: Technōs Japan
Publisher: CSG Imagesoft
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★½

Players take control of a six-player dodgeball team in this action/sports hybrid. The object of the game is to take the single ball and throw it into the three inner court opponents until they lose all of their energy and die. Players can duck, catch, or jump over the ball to avoid the throws. When attacking, players can throw, run and throw, jump and throw, or perform one of two special attack throws per player by running and jump-throwing or run-throwing when at a particular spot on the court. Players may also pass the ball to a teammate or to the three outer court players who can try attacking the other team but who do not lose life and otherwise do not play a role in the game other than as an annoyance. The gameplay is loose, fast, and fun. Smashing the ball into the other team's faces is very satisfying due to the nice controls, animation, satisfying sound effects, and bit of twisted humor thrown in (like players being blasted across the screen and ending up coming out the opposite side). Players control team USA and select which of the players (all with unique attack/defense attributes and their own special throws) they want on the inner and outer court. Players have to then face several teams around the world with their own different players, play court, background and outstanding stage music. There's even a secondary bean-ball game option and a fun two-player head-to-head mode. The only slight drawback is the inability to select teams other than USA in single-player mode, and some sprite-flickering to account for the large amount of players on screen. That aside, this is an outstanding and supremely fun game for both the sports and action game crowd. Note: part of the Kunio-kun series of games.

Reflections: I never owned *Super Dodge Ball* as a kid, but would frequently borrow it from my friend Kevin. It was the sort of game that you could come back to time and time again due to the brilliant mix of fun and hardcore violence involved. Make no mistake, you are *killing* the other players with your flashy special throws. And along the way you have to face a nice variety of teams like Kenya, Iceland, and the evil USSR (SPOILERS – not the final team, but almost!). I have to say a little bit more about the music – the developers really went out of their way to make the tracks at least capture a little bit of the flavor of that region's music. My favorite is the English theme which is a mash-up of a few different Beatles tunes. As a rule, I never have a "favorite" NES game, but this one's always on my short list of recommendations due to its uniqueness and fun/quirkiness. – PC





Super Glove Ball

Genre: Paddle-and-Ball, Action
Release Date: Oct. 1990
Developer: Rare
Publisher: Mattel
Players: 1
Special Features: Power Glove (optional)
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

In this intergalactic game of 3D squash created for use with the Power Glove peripheral or a controller, the player must break through walls by flinging a ball at them in order to escape a first-person maze of rooms. Once all of the tiles from one of the five visible walls are destroyed, the player can usually move on to the next screen. The controllable on-screen glove works on directional momentum when shooting off the projectile, which also affects the ball's speed as a whole raft of random space bugs try to obstruct its trajectory. Power-ups in the form of question mark tiles award various bonuses ranging from ball speed-ups, multiballs, and extra tile clearances to giving the glove "robo-bullets" which can be used at will to hastily clear targets. The ball can also be captured by the glove and then repositioned for release to increase accuracy, but the direction occasionally seems to have a mind of its own, and the last few tiles on a wall are often a hassle to clear. If a rebounded ball goes past the player's glove a set number of times, then a life is lost. Despite offering several different room types to tackle, this title loses steam due to repetitive play. Nonetheless, it's a fairly fun game with good presentation, and it's unique enough to stand out.

Reflections: Get rid of the Nintendo Power Glove elephant in the room and let this game stand on its own merits! It was designed for the peripheral, but it plays absolutely fine on a controller. Moreover, it has enough in the tank to separate itself from being just another *Arkanoid* or *Breakout* clone, and the 3D effect works surprisingly well. However, this type of paddle-control game only has a limited range in terms of gameplay before becoming stale, and there is often too much on the screen, which hampers proceedings. I find the best way of playing this title is by keeping an eye on the ball's shadow on the ground - it's an easy way to follow its movement. – JE

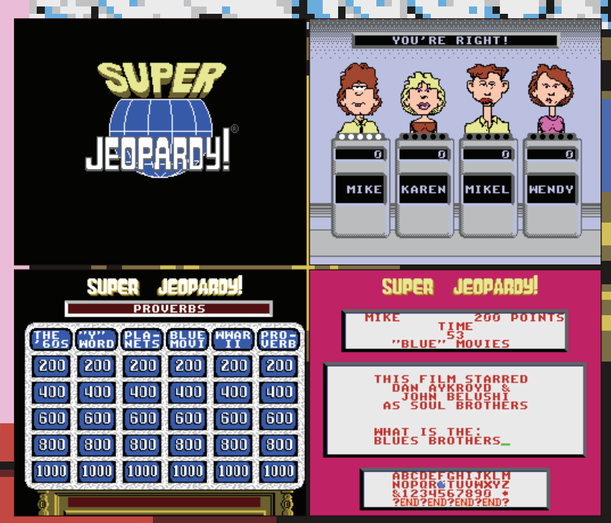
Super Jeopardy!

Genre: Game Show, Trivia
Release Date: Sept. 1991
Developer: David Wiebenson, Bill Jannot, Tobin Dorn, Mike Pierone
Publisher: GameTek
Players: 1-4 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save, NES Four Score / Satellite compatible
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★

This is the final installment in the television trivia show series where players have to provide answers in the form of questions for points. Like before, questions are presented in various categories where values for correct responses increase along with their relative difficulty. Players are presented with answers, and if they want to attempt to respond, can buzz in and use a text parser to input the proper question. If incorrect, that answer's amount will be deducted, but if correct, they will gain that amount and be able to select the next answer to solve. After two full rounds, Final Jeopardy will allow players to risk up to all their earned money in solving a final question (answer). This time out, players will face up to three other computer or human players, with the big difference being the addition of many well-done digitized sounds, including voice and sound effects taken directly from the television show, including the announcing of the points for each question and "Daily Double" sound effects. The visuals from earlier versions have been entirely redone, and now feature exaggerated, bloated cartoon heads for the contestants and host. The ability for up to four human players to participate with their own controller via the NES Four Score or Satellite is a nice bonus. This version of *Jeopardy!* ups the ante of the previous versions with excellent presentation, and is a must-own version for fans of the show.

Reflections: The added voices and sounds at first seem like they are an unneeded addition, but it makes for a very polished product upon playing. *Super Jeopardy!* probably contains the most digitized sound samples of any NES game. I'm hard pressed to think of another title that has this many.

I do miss the character models and different colors of the other versions of the game. If you want to select a character that's nonwhite though, you're out of luck. However, you do get a very smiley, toothey game show host here. Too bad it isn't Alex Trebek and his legendary 'stache. – PC



Super Mario Bros.

Genre: Platformer
Release Date: Oct. 1985
Developer: Nintendo R&D4
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★★★

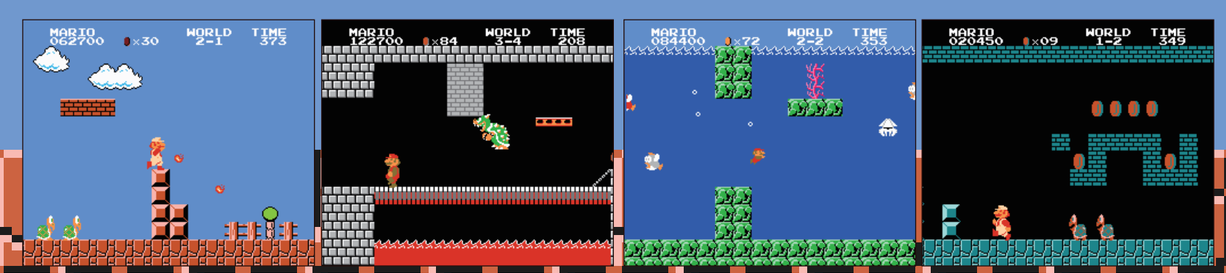
The plumber Mario must battle through eight worlds to rescue the Princess from the evil Bowser in the game that helped resurrect an industry. Mario must travel left-to-right in an allotted amount of time in platforming levels to reach a flagpole while battling minions of the Koopa empire. Such enemies include cute and deadly creatures like mushroom men called Goombas, turtle soldiers named Koopa-Troopas, Piranha Plants, and many more that Mario can usually conquer by jumping on or by throwing fireballs when powered up. Traversing the stages is satisfying due to not only the varying challenges but also the plentiful power-ups (available by jumping and hitting "?" blocks), which include mushrooms to make Mario bigger (allowing him to break bricks and more freedom/strategy in movement and gameplay paths), a fire flower (to allow Mario to throw fireballs to destroy most enemies), and a star (to give him limited invincibility). If the player has a fire flower or mushroom, they can survive one touch from an enemy (they will revert to small Mario, where one more touch will cost a life). There are also many coins to satisfyingly collect, both laying about and in "?" blocks (100 coins earns an extra life). The gameplay is quick and crisp, elevated to a high level by pin-point accurate controls allowing Mario to execute maneuvers and jumps to get in and out of tight spots, run and move to avoid danger, and perform combo jumps/attacks, etc. There's even the ability to jump on and and stop incoming Koopa shells ricocheting back at Mario.

The eight worlds consist of four stages each, which all are varied enough to keep interest going to see what lies ahead, as well as present a new/differing level of challenge. The standard "open world" levels are interspersed nicely with some swimming stages, ones utilizing plenty of pulley platforms, and dungeon levels that cap each of the eight worlds, where Bowser must be defeated via fireballs or by reaching the end of the bridge and touching the ax to collapse it. To encourage level exploration and to enhance replayability, many secrets exist within the stages, like hidden vines to climb and coin rooms down in pipes. These grant the player multiple paths that can have the character skip parts of a stage, and there are even secret warp pipes to skip entire worlds. *Super Mario Bros.* is a marvelous creation with an inspired, living, breathing "world," deep gameplay, great sounds, memorable music, and fantastic control.

Reflections: This game is what inspired the imagination of an entire generation of gamers while reigniting the U.S. home video game market (and leading Nintendo to dominate it). While it was not a game originally packed in with the "Deluxe" set that included R.O.B., within a couple years Nintendo was wise enough to include this with the majority of the NES systems that were released and sold afterwards. It launched not only the biggest and longest regularly running gaming franchise in history, but it helped catapult video games into the popular culture and mainstream once again, so much so that Mario and friends were seen on television, on tons of merchandise, and even your grandmother knew who that mustachioed plumber was.

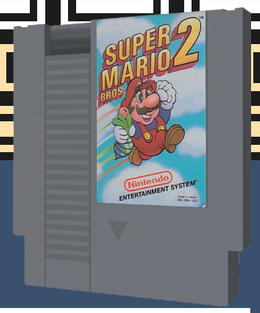
Super Mario Bros., more so than the 29 other early "black box" games Nintendo originally published between 1985-1987, is the one that truly showed off the full capabilities of the NES and captured children's imaginations. This wasn't a simple arcade port, a sports game, or a glorified tech demo, but rather presented a world that gamers could explore over a long period of time on their arduous quest to save the Princess and the Mushroom Kingdom from a diabolical enemy. This was a new frontier for gamers, as most had never seen a game with this deep a story and accompanying gameplay elements. It helped define the very young side-scrolling platforming genre, after which a million or so other games would model themselves. Long gone were the domination of personality-free space-shooter video games. Now, players would travel left-to-right along stages and encounter enemies on a quest. Consumers were intrigued, countless new gamers were created, and the rest is history.

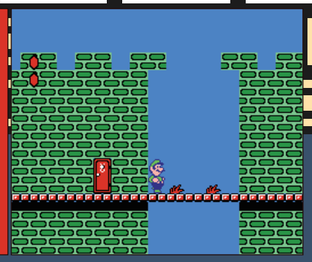
I received this game as a pack-in with the NES Control Deck set (there were also Control Deck sets without the game). Like 95 percent or so of the other children, it was the first game that I ever played on the console. Again, this was Nintendo of America's plan all along to hook us, and boy did it work. When we played together, my sister used to always make me play as player two, who was the green Luigi. This sibling bullying is probably why I love the overlooked brother as much as I do today. – PC



Super Mario Bros. 2

Genre: Platformer
Release Date: Oct. 1988
Developer: Nintendo R&D4
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★★★





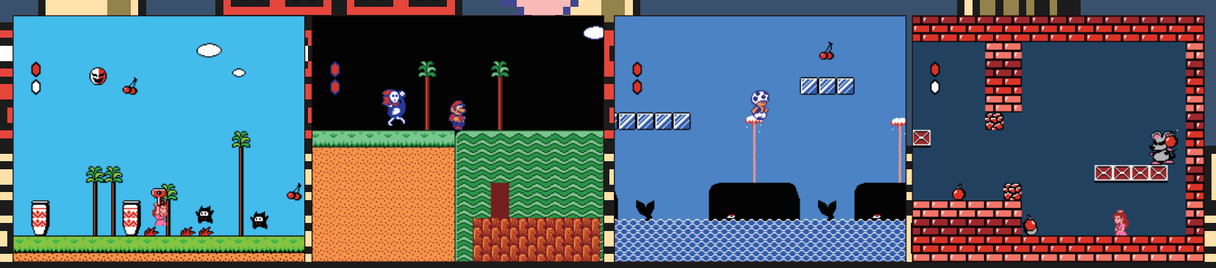
Mario and friends are out to save dreamland Subcon from the evil Wart in this platforming sequel. Before each stage, players can select one of four characters to use. Mario is average in jumping speed and strength in lifting items and walking around with them, Luigi can jump the highest but is somewhat weak handling items, Princess Toadstool is weakest with items but can float on her jumps, and Toad is strongest in picking up and handling items, but has the shortest jump. Choosing which character depends on the player's preference, but certain stages will be easier with specific ones, and there are even areas that can only be reached by specific ones. Gameplay consists of traversing stages both vertically and horizontally, which are divided up into separate areas via red doors. Instead of hopping on enemies to defeat them, players can jump on and pick up small enemies to throw them into others. Likewise, players can pull vegetables out of the ground and throw them as weapons. Defeating several enemies may cause a heart to rise up, which can be picked up to replenish the life meter. Collecting cherries will cause the starman to float up, which will grant limited invincibility. Players may find other objects in the ground, like turtle shells, "POW" blocks to clear enemies from the screen, and potions that can be thrown to reveal a door. If players step into that door, they will enter a mirrored, dark "Subspace" for a limited time, where players can pull vegetables for coins and can pick up mushrooms in places to add one to the life meter for that stage. The coins can be redeemed at the end of the level for slot machine chances for extra lives.

The levels are extremely varied and usually not simple left-to-right affairs. Players will climb ladders and vines, have to blow up blocks with bombs, and do more in to order to proceed. There are several different ways to proceed through levels, which keeps matters interesting as players will seek out keys, ride magic carpets, jump from one hopping fish to another, ride on enemies over spikes, and even ride on flying birds to pass through. Some sections require falling long distances safely onto a platform, backtracking may be required in some, and there are even digging sections. Players will usually encounter the mini-boss Birdo at the end of stages, who can be defeated by hopping on the eggs fired at them and throwing them back at Birdo. The character design is fantastic, with cute and memorable enemies like Shyguy, Ninji, Bob-Omb, Mouser, Pokey, and more. Levels are lush with colors to accentuate the very good graphics, and the seven worlds have a specific theme to stand out from one another, for example jungle, desert, or an ice world. A wonderful soundtrack rounds out this absolutely dreamy sequel.

Reflections: I'm not sure how I never owned this game as a child. I used to rent it a lot, and I even asked for it directly more than once from my parents, but they probably could not afford both this title and *Zelda II*, since I asked for both at the same time. Or maybe they could afford it but were terrible parents. I kid, Mom and Dad.

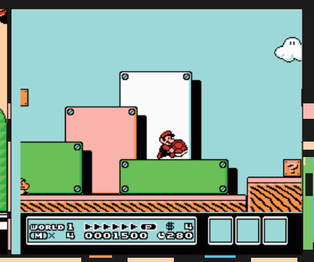
It's common knowledge to most game fans by now that this game was a re-skinned and slightly altered version of the Famicom Disk System game *Doki Doki Panic*. In Japan, the *Super Mario Bros. 2* they received was basically an expansion pack of the original game, featuring minor additions like poison mushrooms, wind, and changing Luigi to be a selectable character who was a higher jumper but was more slippery to control. And oh yeah, the game was about 10 times tougher than the original. I personally asked Howard Phillips (formerly of Nintendo of America) why that game was not brought to the United States, and he responded that Nintendo of America was critical of not just the difficulty overkill, but also the fact that the game's flow was changed so that it couldn't be run through the same way as the original. That and elements like the poison mushroom created an inverse experience to the original, where as before players were encouraged to hit any mystery block they wished, but in the sequel they had to be careful in doing so.

That said, there are some silly folks out there today who think that *Super Mario Bros. 2* is not a "true" Super Mario game (part of the revisionist history claiming that this is not a good game). The joke's on them for not being able to enjoy a truly fantastic game. – PC



Super Mario Bros. 3

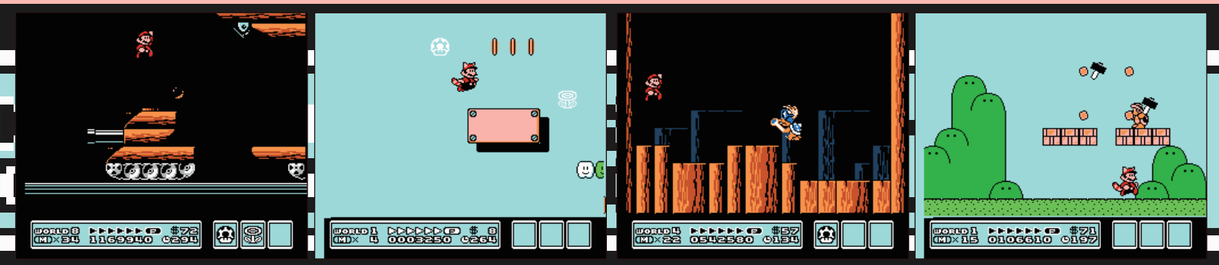
Genre: Platformer
Release Date: Feb. 1990
Developer: Nintendo R&D4
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★★★



Mario and Luigi are back to save the Mushroom Kingdom, this time from the Koopalings, Bowser's seven children. Each has taken over a specific world and has transformed the king into an animal with a magic wand. Play begins on an overworld map, with connecting paths between various stages, mushroom houses (for bonus items), Hammer Brothers encounters, at least one castle, and the world's airship that must be conquered. Players move their character on the overworld map and can enter it to play that platforming level. Levels vary in style, as some require Mario to traverse fairly straightforwardly, some have separate sections traveled to via warp pipes, and some require thought in figuring out the correct path. Gameplay consists of walking, running, and jumping around on platforms while avoiding or defeating enemies such as Goombas and Koopa turtles, most of which can be eliminated by jumping on them. Many elements return from the first game, including being able to jump and destroy bricks and jumping to hit "?" blocks (to gain coins, power-ups, extra-life mushrooms, vines to climb, etc.). A new ability has the player being able to pick up shells and blocks via B and then throw them by releasing the button. Standard power-ups include three that return from the original game: the mushroom (which increases the size of Mario) fire flower (which lets the player throw fireballs), star (limited invincibility), and the new leaf, which transforms Mario into a raccoon. A major selling point of the game, as a raccoon Mario can swing his tail and hit enemies and blocks/bricks, as well as use it to float down to the ground more slowly when in air. When running as a raccoon, Mario can build up the "P" meter on the bottom of the screen, and when it's filled, will be able to take to the skies and fly for a limited amount of time, being able to reach secret and alternate areas of a stage or even being able to bypass large parts of it.

The objective of each timed stage is to get to the flashing box at the end and jump into it to collect one of three cards: star, mushroom, or flower. Collecting three cards will result in an extra life, but collecting three of a kind results in more. Inventive stages are usually very different from one another, with some having swimming sections, some being auto-scrolling horizontally, vertically, and/or diagonally, some having hills/slopes Mario can slide down, moving platforms, treadmills, and much more. Being that each of the worlds have a specific theme, such as Ice Land, Desert Land, Pipe Land, and even Giant Land (where objects and enemies are oversized), playing the creative stages doesn't get old. Some stages, especially the castles, require a bit more thought in navigating, with multiple doors that can be entered. "P" switch blocks can be hopped on, which will transform coins into blocks and vice-versa for a limited time, which can be effective at reaching new areas, and also to reveal secret doors. Enemies are plentiful in variety, including the aforementioned standard foes, but also ones like the giant Big Bertha fish, Paragoomba (flying Goomba), Spike (Koopa that throws spike balls), Dry Bones (Koopa skeleton), Boo ghosts, not to mention the castle mini-boss Boom Boom and the Koopalings themselves. Controls are just about perfection in navigating the sprawling, well-designed stages, graphics are top-notch, sounds are great, and the soundtrack is marvelous, with many notable and unforgettable tracks. The package is completed by an abundance of extra features, including storable power-ups, bonus mini-games, secrets to find, and special suits with abilities Mario will possess when wearing, like a frog suit, tanooki suit, and hammer suit. There's even the ability for two players to take turns to conquer the eight worlds by working together. This shining pinnacle of 8-bit platformers, and arguably the entirety of 8-bit video games, will continue to impress game players for generations to come.

Reflections: *Super Mario Bros. 3* deserves all the praise and acclaim it receives. It is the perfection of the platforming genre, having taken the structure of the first Mario game and mixed it with some of the zaniness and creativity of the sequel, while adding extremely well-thought-out levels, new gameplay elements, very fun power-ups, and surprises like the Goomba shoe Mario can ride in (which only shows up for one level)! The release of *Super Mario Bros. 3* cemented the NES as the dominant video game console on the planet, encapsulated beautifully by the television commercial where a throng of people wearing the same clothes chant "Mario!", with the camera pulling back to space to reveal Mario's smiling face on the middle of the United States. It's a brilliant commercial, and wasn't too far off from the truth. While I still prefer *Super Mario Bros. 2*, I'd be mistaken if I thought it was a superior game versus the one that completed the brilliant NES trilogy. – PC



Super Mario Bros./ Duck Hunt

Genre: Compilation
Release Date: Mar. 1988
Developer: Nintendo
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-2
Special Features: Zapper compatibility
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
N/R

This compilation cart consists of two games, *Super Mario Bros.* and *Duck Hunt*, both playable via a menu on startup. Please see the individual reviews for more information on each.

Reflections: This cartridge is the most common NES game in existence, due to the fact that it was the pack-in game with the NES Action Set (the most common NES set sold), which included the console, two controllers, and the Zapper. Whenever you find a box of NES games at a flea market or at a garage sale, you're just about always guaranteed to find a copy of this game in with the rest (sometimes even two!). In the *Nintendo World Championships* episode from the Angry Video Game Nerd series that I produced with James Rolfe, a joke between the Pat the NES Punk and Nerd characters has Pat joking that he's planning on making a coffee table out of *Super Mario Bros./Duck Hunt* carts. Not that you should, but if you wanted to, you could easily find the 100 to 150 carts needed and accommodate that wish. – PC

Super Mario Bros./Duck Hunt/ World Class Track Meet

Genre: Compilation
Release Date: Sept. 1988
Developer: Nintendo, TRY
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-2
Special Features: Zapper compatibility, Power Pad compatibility
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
N/R

This compilation cart consists of three games: *Super Mario Bros.*, *Duck Hunt*, and *World Class Track Meet*, all playable via a menu on startup. Please see the individual reviews for more information on each.

Reflections: This combo cart was included with the NES Power Set, which included the system, two controllers, Zapper, and Power Pad accessory. The main selling point of this system was obviously the Power Pad. I never owned one as a kid, but it probably wouldn't have hurt, since I was gaining weight from sitting on my butt while trying to defeat *Bionic Commando* and *Top Secret Episode*. – PC

Super Pitfall

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: Nov. 1987
Developer: Pony Canyon, Micronics
Publisher: Activision
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★

You're Harry, an adventurer who must explore caves to find treasure, your lost niece Rhonda, and your friend Quickclaw the Lion before returning them to the entrance. Featuring elements from *Pitfall!* and *Pitfall II: Lost Caverns* (e.g., the setting, flying balloons, water pools), this labyrinthine platformer also scrolls vertically and horizontally while emphasizing score and exploration. However, it is completely inferior to its Atari 2600 predecessors. The controls are standard, but the way everything moves (scrolling, sprites, animations) looks jittery and unstable. Even the repetitive music and sound are glitchy. The screen only scrolls a certain distance from the edge, requiring memorization for blind leaps and hazards. Jumping is imprecise, and so is falling, which has variable physics depending on whether you were moving when you began to drop. You either descend with some control or straight down like a stone (usually when you miss a jump), passing several floors and losing progress. Rope swinging is present but rare and barely animated. Enemies include frogs, snakes, bats, cavemen, and others, and all can kill instantly. If you have bullets, you can shoot, but most creatures are too short to be targeted - even the manual admits, "At times [your] pistol seems useless." Later on, you encounter enemies that shoot projectiles and can take multiple hits. To win, you locate certain people and items, an antidote for Rhonda (who's been petrified), crystal balls (functionally keys), a cage key, etc., plus power-ups including extra lives and guns. Some of these are invisible objects, found only by jumping *constantly*, and teleportation spots are also invisible (fortunately, their locations are consistent). There are no delineated levels; new parts of the cave are indicated by different colors (rocks, dirt, wood). This title crosses the line between challenging and infuriating, but connoisseurs of bad games might be entertained.

Reflections: This title lazily recycles the story of *Pitfall II*, but thankfully, it's not considered a port. *Pitfall II* was an amazing technical achievement on almost all platforms it graced. So how did this NES game happen? Although *Super Pitfall* has Activision's name, David Crane didn't make it. Micronics developed it for the Famicom, and Pony made a much more competent-looking, stable version for the PC-8801 computer. I don't know why Activision branded this trash. And who are Rhonda and Quickclaw the Lion? Turns out they're from the 1983 *Pitfall Harry* cartoon on CBS's *Saturday Supercade*, and subsequently they appeared in *Pitfall II*. – KN

Super Spike V'Ball

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Feb. 1990
Developer: Technōs Japan
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-4 (simultaneous)
Special Features: NES Four Score / Satellite compatible
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

This two-on-two beach volleyball game features players taking to the sand courts for one of two competitions: the American Circuit and a World Cup. Four different selectable teams are available with different strengths and weaknesses (including the Double Dragon brothers). The gameplay is standard volleyball fare with serving, bumping the ball and setting, with the largest emphasis being on the spiking mechanic in the game to score points. Players have the ability to do a "super spike," which is a much quicker ball strike that has a greater chance of being unable to be returned or "dug" out of the sand by the opposing team. While the gameplay doesn't get much deeper than the setting/execution and blocking/defending of spikes, the controls are responsive and makes for fun and quick-paced action. Graphics are very good, and the very well-put together soundtrack adds to the enjoyment. There are also a good amount of options here, including the ability to set the point goal, number of sets, normal or "rally" rules, and even the ability to auto set spikes. Up to four players can also get in on the action with either the Four Score or NES Satellite, including the ability for two players to team up for one of the tournament modes.

Reflections: Of course, whenever I think of beach volleyball, I either think of the attractive women who play in the Summer Olympics or the famous scene in *Top Gun*.

It always makes me scratch my head when I think that the tough martial arts street brawling duo of Billy and Jimmy Lee play beach volleyball on the side. How did they take up such a niche and seasonal sport? How did they get good enough to turn pro? Do they have any sponsors? Does the Black Warriors gang tease them about it during their fistfights? – PC

Super Spike V'Ball/ Nintendo World Cup

Genre: Sports, Compilation
Release Date: Dec. 1990
Developer: Technōs Japan
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-4 (Simultaneous)
Special Features: NES Four Score / Satellite compatible
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
N/R

Please see individual game listings for in-depth reviews. This compilation title was only available as part of the NES Sports Set which included the system, four controllers, NES Satellite accessory, and this game cartridge.

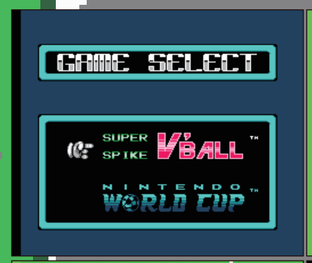
Reflections: What a nice but strange little two-pack. It's like Nintendo knew they needed to make a big splash to help sell the NES Four Score and Satellite and four-player games out of the gate, so they sourced two very good sports games by Technōs Japan for their pack-in, instead of even bothering to develop one themselves. Now, there were only 22 three or four-player games released on the NES spaced out over the next few years. Some of those titles you wouldn't even realize supported that many players unless the facts were thrown in your face. *Gauntlet II*? OK, makes sense. *NES Play Action Football*? Sure, why not. But what about titles like *M.U.L.E.*? *Swords and Serpents*? *A Nightmare on Elm Street*? The problem wasn't just the small number of titles available, but the eclectic nature of them, as it's highly improbable that any one gamer would have owned even 50 percent of the available Four Score / Satellite games. Sure, a few sports games would make sense, but not a few sports games as well as a dungeon crawler, esoteric strategy game, arcade shooter, and then a couple mediocre basketball games to boot. – PC

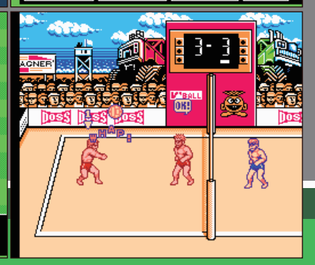
Super Sprint

Genre: Racing
Release Date: 1989
Developer: Atari Games
Ported by: Tengen
Publisher: Tengen
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Common
★★★

In this port of the overhead arcade racing game, players race in one of eight courses against three other racers on single screens. The race cars zip around quickly and must be precisely maneuvered around tight corners and turns, while watching out for cones, mud puddles, and oil slicks. There is only acceleration, so braking is accomplished by taking your finger off the A button. The game ends (but can be continued) if the player does not come in first place. The solid controls allow competent players to almost always keep up their speed while turning (as long as they don't hit a wall and wreck, of course). Wrenches which appear on the tracks can be picked up and exchanged for increases in your racer's top speed, acceleration, or tire traction after the race. After completing all the race courses, they will cycle through again, only with increased course obstacles each time, like tornadoes and/or hydraulic poles that have to be navigated around. It's a fun, quick, arcade-style racing experience, but the lack of features and repeating courses (there's only seven) keep this one from wanting to be played for more than a short time.

Reflections: The arcade cabinet of this one was a good one, featuring three steering wheels, and was probably the influence for the *Super Off Road* cabinet. As for this game, it's fun, but lacks the "oomph" that keeps it from being one of my more favored Atari arcade games. By the way, I should comment and make a joke about races that should be canceled when tornadoes are on the track, but I don't have it in me to make a clever *Twister* reference right now. "Finger of God!" Eh, I tried. – PC





Super Spy Hunter

Genre: Shooter, Action
Release Date: Feb. 1992
Developer: Tokai Engineering
Publisher: Sunsoft
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★½

The sequel to the fast-paced vehicular shooter again features a weaponized car out to destroy enemies on the road. Armed with a blaster that fires forward and two cannons that can be fired in any direction by using the A button to switch the placement, players maneuver and change speed on the road while avoiding enemies, enemy fire, and road hazards. The action is fast-paced and frenetic, so luckily the player is given a health bar to deal with damage incurred. Upgrades to the health bar as well as weapon power-ups can be obtained by destroying blue vans with letters on them. These come in the form of one-use secondary weapons as well as upgrading the main blaster and even automating the two back cannons to auto-aim at enemies. The levels are well-defined, intricate, and even include alternate/divergent paths, traps, and water sections where the car turns into a boat and back again (much like the original game). There's even an impressive fighter jet stage that alone could have been the basis of its own game. The feeling of speed in the game is absolutely thrilling, making the shooting and dodging of combat exhilarating at its quick pace. Enemy bosses are very large, different, and take some thought and strategy to overcome. All is not perfect, though, as the difficulty, while initially fair, becomes almost unreasonable in the later stages, especially with the road traps that require some trial and error to handle. Graphically, the visuals impress and the soundtrack is rocking, even managing to work in a variation of the theme from *Peter Gunn* that the original game was famous for utilizing.

Reflections: I'm hard pressed to think of another game (at least in the NES library), where the quality of gameplay, graphics, music, etc. jumped up so significantly between the first game and its sequel. Of course, it was nearly a decade between the arcade original and this sequel, and technically this originally was not a *Spy Hunter* game, but only became one after permission given by Bally Midway. I was tempted to give this game a full five stars. However, there are two real knocks here: the difficulty of a couple of end bosses, but more particularly, the traps on the last stage. In particular, there's a jumping section that requires almost near perfect precision, specifically a stutter-jump that requires such insanely specific control that I don't see any player on Earth being able to successfully do it in even three attempts, let alone the first time encountering it. I consider myself a pretty adept player, but there's difficulty, and then there's *insane* difficulty. – PC

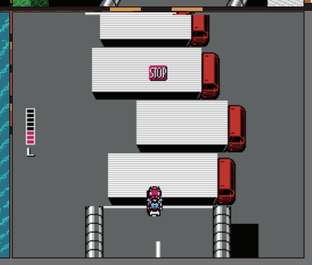
Super Team Games

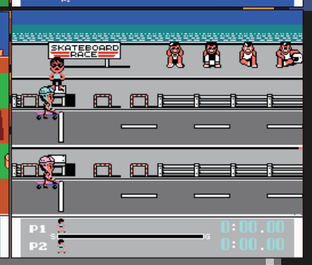
Genre: Sports
Release Date: Nov. 1988
Developer: Sonata
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-6 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Power Pad (required)
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

This side-scrolling sports title features use of the Power Pad, so prepare to burn calories! There are team play and tournaments modes, with up to six players squeezing onto the mat's 12 circles. Gameplay is presented with a split-screen view of two competitor's courses on top and bottom. Events consist of Log Hop (running and jumping logs), Belly Bump Ball (running and hitting into a giant ball), Water Cross (swimming), Crab Walk (a wide-legged stance), Wall Jump (large jumps in between running), Bubble Run (pumping the bubble with your hands on the Power Pad before running in it), Skateboard Race (changing feet position to slalom past objects), 6 Legged Race (three-player team working together), and Tug of War (three players versus three players running to pull). While most of the events are variants to just running, the characters respond well on screen to the movement and jumping. The play can be exhausting, especially the obstacles courses which gruelingly combine several events into one race. The character design of the game is cute, which keeps it entertaining to watch. While it's short on features, the variety of unique races should keep you entertained, and sweating, on the Power Pad.

Reflections: Yes, I've played this game, and all the events, more than once. During the second annual NES Marathon, I thought I was going to have to call an ambulance for Ian after the obstacle course race. This game takes a lot out of you, as the races seem to last forever in places. If you trained using this game and the Power Pad, you'd honestly shed a lot of pounds.

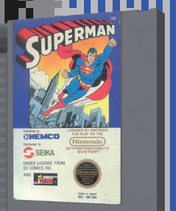
I remember seeing this game advertised in *Nintendo Power*, and still can see the six people crammed together on the Power Pad with their differently colored socks. I've never witnessed a live six player *Super Team Games* event nor even heard of one, but I cannot imagine the funk wafting in that room after 10 minutes of six people playing and sweating on that plastic mat. – PC





Superman

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: Dec. 1988
Developer: Kemco
Publisher: Kemco
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★⋆



Taking control of the famous superhero, players must save Metropolis from various threats over several different missions. Players begin as Clark Kent, who can jump and punch enemies. If players enter a phone booth on the street and their power meter is high enough, they will transform into Superman, who has more powerful punches, can jump higher, and can run faster. If players lose enough energy, they will revert back into Clark, although Kryptonite (good and bad) can be found throughout the levels to alter the energy meter in either direction. Several secondary powers as Superman are available which have a limited amount of uses but can be replenished throughout the game via icons gathered from defeated enemies. Some of these powers are used to take out enemies, like heat vision, while others like flight can be used to travel around the very large Metropolis map. Missions consist of traveling back and forth between locations, talking to people who will give you clues on where to go next, whereupon players will travel to one building after another in succession defeating enemies and gaining more clues until traveling to the final destination of that mission (usually inside a building) and defeating the enemy boss. Gameplay isn't too interesting overall, as the enemy types are largely the same, Superman's punch attack doesn't feel/look impressive, and the obtuse nature and large amount of traveling back and forth on the very large map can get tiresome. The very average graphics, music, and sounds don't help the tedium. However, the nonlinear and exploratory nature of the game is something very different, even if the missions themselves all seem somewhat similar.

Reflections: I borrowed this game a few different times from my grandfather's neighbor (he owned over 100 different NES games, most of which were unplayed). I used to love the wide-open adventurous nature of the game, but I don't think I ever bothered playing past the third mission as a kid, as it gets very old, very quickly, resulting in a very long, drawn-out experience. This game probably contributed quite a deal to my poor eyesight due to that. Super vision my ass!

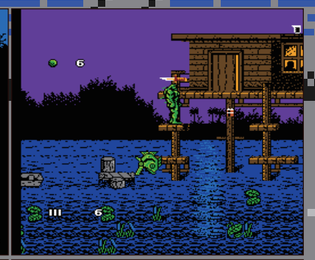
While the Famicom version contains it, the NES game cart features none of the famous *Superman* film music from John Williams. Instead, there is music substituted from another game that was never released here. Both versions, however, comically feature the Statue of Freedom (Liberty) strangely talking to Superman and explaining the story. – PC

Swamp Thing

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Dec. 1992
Developer: Imagineering
Publisher: THQ
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★

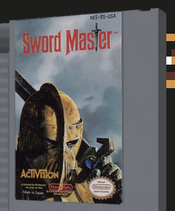
Defend Swamp Thing from Dr. Arcane's Un-Men in this incredibly lackluster action title. Players will progress through levels fighting mechanical animals of all sorts, like rats, alligators, racially insensitive headhunters, skeletons, and a bit more generic fare while picking up health items and the occasional, limited projectile weapon. The main attack is a simple punch that can't be used while ducking which, while lazy, could be written off if not for the fact that many of the enemies are knee high. Swamp Thing cannot harm them, so he must literally jump over and engage in noncombat with at least a third of the enemies. When he can engage in combat, the poor reach of the punch almost guarantees at least a small loss of health before the enemy is destroyed. The projectile weapon helps a little, but still makes the low-crawling foes a nuisance. Jumps are awkward because they propel Swamp Thing forward faster than he can walk, which makes it feel as if he has a springboard attached to his feet at all times. Collision detection feels like it's about a pixel off, which leads to quick draining of the health meter. The Un-Men, mutant creations of Dr. Arcane, act as bosses in the game but only show up sporadically. When they do appear, they put up no more difficult a fight than any other common enemy, except they require a few more hits, making the important battles just as insipid as the rest of the game. While just shy of completely broken, the choices made when designing the game do a fair job of draining any enjoyment one might get from the experience. It's playable, but barely.

Reflections: I realize that titles like these exist to make money, but a little simple play-testing and code adjusting could have made this at least average and recommendable to fans of the character. Like every other THQ game on the NES, the graphics used for the cutscenes are terrifying, but this time there's a flaming man running from a burning building for that extra "je ne sais quoi." – IF



Sword Master

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Jan. 1992
Developer: Athena
Publisher: Activision
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Rare
★★★



As a medieval knight, players use their sword-fighting skills to battle evil wizards, wolves, skeletons, and other fantastical enemies. You have the ability to swing your sword overhead, stab, and block with your shield (which has limited use). There's also a "double jump" feature that almost never works in practice, as the timing has to be ultra-precise to pull it off. The controls otherwise are solid as you can even crouch-walk forward and backward to defend when fighting enemies one-on-one. You can level up your character with experience points to obtain a larger health bar, and even cast projectile attack spells by switching off to a wizard character. There is a good level of difficulty, so the option to continue helps. The animation, sounds, and graphics are all technically fine, but the actual sword fighting that the game is based on is fairly shallow. The strategy involved in swordplay/blocking is somewhat limited, especially the use of the shield, which isn't as helpful as it should be in defending. Still, it's a unique diversion with a dark and moody feel, if a bit stilted in the execution.

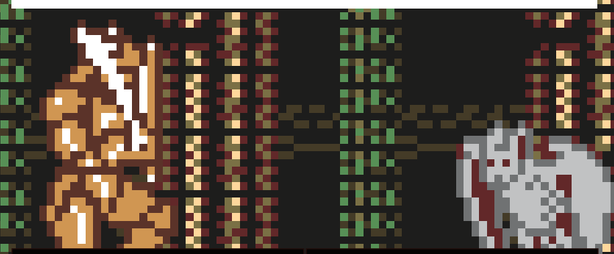
Reflections: If not for the annual NES Charity Marathons I do with Ian, I would not ever have a chance to play a good amount of the NES games that I own. *Sword Master* is one of those titles that for whatever reason was produced in very small quantities, and was an idea that wasn't alluring enough to garner attention. After playing it, I'm saddened by the fact that the sword-fighting gameplay isn't deep enough to give me a chance to relive my college fencing glory days... all two months of them. – PC

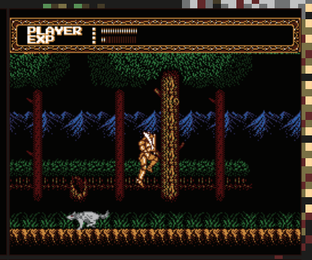
Swords and Serpents

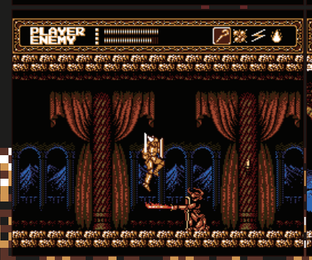
Genre: RPG
Release Date: Aug. 1990
Developer: Interplay Productions
Publisher: Acclaim Entertainment
Players: 1-4 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Battery Save, NES Four Score / Satellite compatible
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

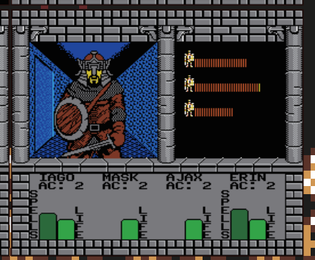
In this fantasy RPG, players must guide a party of adventurers through a 16-level dungeon to vanquish an evil serpent. The game begins by prompting players to create four characters from three available classes: Warrior, Magician, and Thief. Players may reroll virtual dice as many times as needed to get the desired statistics for each character, or else use a pre-generated party. The game supports up to four players via the NES Four Score or Satellite who may control each member of the party, but a leader will still control the party's movement. The interface consists of a split-screen window with a first-person view of the maze on the left side, and a crudely drawn map on the right with an arrow to indicate the party's current position. Random encounters occur throughout the dungeon in a turn-based format with foes ranging from giant spiders and bats, to zombies and armored warriors. Players may choose to attack, cast spells, or flee the battle, with gold and experience being awarded for victory. Unlike most other RPGs, the party members level up as a unit, rather than individually. At times, monsters will also drop weapons and armor, which can otherwise be purchased from the armory located within the dungeon. If the party is completely defeated, they are automatically revived at the nearest temple, which normally provides healing for the group. While the music and graphics are substandard, the monsters themselves are colorful and well-drawn. However, the map is sketchy, and the password system is needlessly complex, with no less than five passwords (one for each character, plus a fifth for overall progress) required to continue the game. All of this amounts to a strikingly below-average RPG.

Reflections: Developed by Interplay, the company responsible for such classics as *Fallout*, *Baldur's Gate*, and *Planescape: Torment*, *Swords and Serpents* is one of its early endeavors into the RPG genre. As a fan of dungeon crawlers in general, I can appreciate the huge layout and random item drops, but the map system is too poorly implemented to be of any real use. Since you're only ever shown a small sliver of the dungeon on the map screen, there's no way to tell where you are in relation to where you need to go. Furthermore, since the maps aren't saved along with your characters, the manual suggests that you draw and keep your own maps. While this is a very common concept with games of this type, it seems kind of redundant given that that game already provides you with one. And of course, the password system is atrocious. – JP









Taboo: The Sixth Sense

Genre: Other, Simulation
Release Date: Apr. 1989
Developer: Rare
Publisher: Tradewest
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⋆

This tarot card reading simulator begins by having the user input their name, date of birth, and sex. The game then asks for a question the user desires to be answered. The game "shuffles" a tarot card deck (with dizzying graphical effects) and chooses a card that signifies the user and 10 cards that represent the answer to the question in 10 positions. One at a time, the card will be revealed with its definition, as well as the position (their meaning can be looked up in the manual), such as "where one finds oneself" and "past influences." The cards are not supposed to be a direct predictor of the future but rather are supposed to reflect a general feeling at the present moment, indicating a probable outcome, which is revealed with the tenth and last card. Afterwards, the user can retrieve "lucky" lottery numbers. The user can repeat the process again with a new question if desired. This nongame may be entertaining for fans of the metaphysical and tarot, but anyone else may see it as a strange curiosity in the NES library. Adjust the rating based upon your personal enjoyment of occult-based entertainment.

Reflections: From the back of the box: "Taboo the Sixth Sense is not intended for children under 14. It is meant for curiosity value and entertainment only. No mystical or magical claims are guaranteed or inferred."

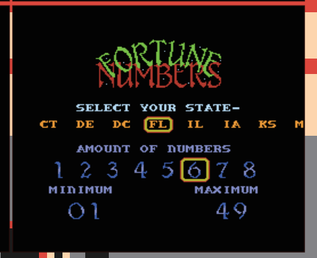
This title is unique in the fact that it features both religious and nude images on the cards. Being that a random tarot card is seen when the game is powered on means that players can be greeted with 8-bit breasts. It's just the cherry on top of this strange sundae. I don't see people with true interest in tarot buying a video game version versus using the physical cards. Still, this did sell a good amount of copies, so I'm guessing it was sold mostly on the weird "fortune teller" premise of predicting the future by using a video game. Has anyone ever been at a dinner party in the late '80s or early '90s and had this game played instead of something like *Pictionary*? If so, I'd love to hear the story. – PC

Tag Team Wrestling

Genre: Wrestling
Release Date: Oct. 1986
Developer: Technōs Japan
Ported by: Sakata SAS
Publisher: Data East
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★⋆

This simple and oddly designed tag team-specific wrestling game has the player controlling the Ricky Fighters, the typical handsome faces, while player two or the CPU will control the Strong Bads, the evil, masked heels. The goal is to win 25 matches and become the Super Champion. The A button will punch, and if close enough, controls a basic grapple that upon connecting with the opponent will stop the game and bring up a text menu. On this menu, the player has seconds to scroll and select a move with the B button or they'll be hit with a reversal from their opponent. There's a decent list of moves available with enziguris, slams, and lariats, but being able to take it in and actually scroll to the desired move is more luck than skill. The selected attack plays out automatically and then the action resumes. Of course, players can go to the corner and tag in their partner if their energy meter is low. Wrestlers can venture outside and fight, even with available weapons there. Matches end with a player being pinned or submitted. It's all extremely basic and the part real-time, part menu-driven gameplay is boring and has absolutely no flow or momentum. It's interesting for introducing the tag team mechanic to wrestling video games, and has a few neat touches like being able to call in one's partner when close to submission, but basically any other game with the word "wrestling" in the title is more worthwhile.

Reflections: There was a short period in high school where I was buying up any old wrestling game I could for various 8- and 16-bit systems at the weekend flea markets, and then playing them afterwards with a friend. When we played this one for the first time, I had no idea what to expect, so it was pretty amusing to see the menu pop up the first time. It was even more amusing to turn the power off and play something better. This title is probably most well known for being the source of Strong Bad's name in the *Homestar Runner* cartoons. – IF



Tagin' Dragon

Genre: Action
Release Date: 1990
Developer: Sachen
Publisher: Bunch Games
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Rare
★⋆

Play tag with a group of dragons in this competitive, single-screen action game. The player controls a dragon (that looks suspiciously like a triceratops) around a small maze containing three other dragons and some wall breaking power-ups. The goal is to bite off the three segments of an opponent's tail. This can be done by approaching from behind and pressing bite, or it can accomplished head-on if both players have a tail of equal length. A dragon with a shorter tail can never attack from the front. Biting a tail will restore the size of yours if it has been bitten. Metal blocks of the maze cannot be eaten through, but hedges can be by getting the magic lantern, enabling a minor strategy of being able to eat through them to get at enemies and uncover other pick-ups. There are also "time zone" spots that will damage the player if they stay in them for long, and ice that can slide the dragons without stopping. In theory, the game's idea is unique and sound. In execution, the controls feel sluggish, collision detection on bites feels incredibly random, and all dinosaurs move the same speed, which makes chasing an opponent's tail a fruitless task, especially in two-player versus mode. Some bonus items are available to try and extend the game's play value, like increasing the dragon's speed and extra lives. There's also a two-player co-op in addition to the competitive mode. However, the experience remains always incredibly shallow, and the below average graphics and sounds don't help.

Reflections: This could have been a neat, quick party game if only developers with skill were behind it. It would have been a fun change of pace when playing other multiplayer games with friends. The game is somewhat creepy with the cannibalistic tail-eating. – IF

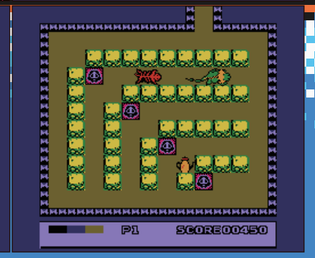
You thought you could read through an entire book about the NES game library without coming across a game where you bite at reptile ass? Wrong! Thanks, Sachen! – PC

TaleSpin

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Dec. 1991
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

Based upon the Disney animated series, the player takes control of Baloo in this side-scrolling shooter. Baloo must shoot down and avoid sky pirates while picking up supplies for cash and fruit for points. The big differentiator here from most other shooters is the ability to fly back in the opposite direction by pressing the A button (which also turns your plane upside down). It lets you get certain items and get into some tight spots, although enemies that you've already defeated/flown past will annoyingly reappear to harass you again. Graphics are refined and colorful, and the music is quality. The gameplay is the big downer in this one, as the speed of Baloo's plane is much too slow, especially when coupled with the single-shot firepower capability. Although the plane's mobility, firing speed, and other plane attributes can be upgraded via cash accrued at the end of each level, this decision short-changes the gameplay and makes the first few levels in the under-powered plane more difficult than they should be, creating a difficulty imbalance early on.

Reflections: I loved the *TaleSpin* cartoon as a kid. Baloo was a great, likeable main character and the cartoon was, dare I say, a little bit more mature than the typical cartoons at the time, even the other Disney ones. It's a great licensing opportunity for a video game, so I'm going to chalk up Capcom's shortcomings here to the fact that they typically didn't do shooters. Oh well, at least it's better than the awful platforming version on the TurboGrafx-16 console. – PC



Target: Renegade

Genre: Beat 'em Up
Release Date: Mar. 1990
Developer: Software Creations
Publisher: Taito
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⯪

Players must take on street thugs to save their brother from Mr. Big in this seven-level beat 'em up experience. Players can attack with a pretty good variety of moves: punch (A), kick (B), sweep kick (B + DOWN), jump kick (B + UP), and a head-butt (tapping forward – not documented in manual). Movement and gameplay are very fluid, and there are usually several characters on the screen at once with no flicker or slowdown. Enemies range from various street thugs to guys on motorcycles. Graphics are pretty nice, including some very large boss sprites. The challenge is a little unbalanced, however. It's hard to take down enemy groups without sustaining damage, and although hearts are available to replenish the health meter (they are hard to pick up), players are only given one life and one continue before the game ends. To help, sometimes a bat is available from thugs that can be picked up and used, but it's not too damaging overall. Bosses are particularly unfair, taking off a huge chunk of energy with one hit. However, they can usually be dealt with by utilizing movement and angles. It's a decent game with a solid foundation, although in need of a little more polish and thought.

Reflections: This game plays and feels like a beefed-up version of *Double Dragon* on the NES, leaving me to believe that the developers started with a version of that game engine. The main character (unnamed) even looks like Billy Lee's character from that game. I enjoy the original *Renegade* far more than this game, probably because that game had shoulder throws, running, and pin-down attacks.

The Asian-looking character on the cover art never appears in the game as far as I know, nor does any sniping occur, evident by the bullseye on him. An instruction manual hint notes that "punches don't work on motorcycles." A helpful hint not only for the game, but for life. – PC

Tecmo Baseball

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Jan. 1989
Developer: Tecmo
Publisher: Tecmo
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

This baseball title features 14 teams (all based upon real MLB teams but with alternate player names), an all-star game option, and a very short season and playoff mode via a password save option. Pitching and batting takes place from a behind the pitcher via third-person perspective, which shows off some nice graphics/animation and allows for some very good control when pitching and batting. When pitching, players can adjust the aim, speed, and curve of the ball. When batting, players can move left/right in the batter's box and must gauge whether to swing low, high, or level. After the ball is hit, the viewpoint changes to the traditional overhead view. Control in the field is pretty solid, with fairly quick fielders and the ability to jump in the air for the ball. The lack of diving left/right for ground balls is disappointing, though. Advancing baserunners is awkward due to the strange requirement of choosing/advancing one runner at a time with the D-pad instead of being able to move all runners at once like in a typical baseball game. Presentation is very good, with excellent umpire voice samples and highlights being shown via the scoreboard. It's a barebones baseball game, but for what it does, it does fairly well.

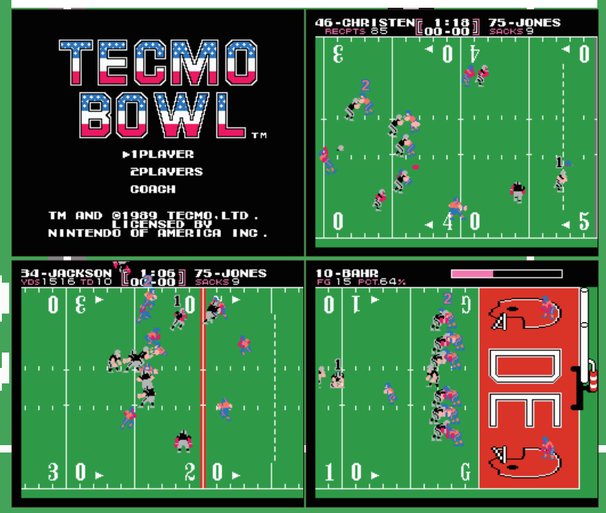
Reflections: As a kid, I never really enjoyed this game, but have learned to like it more as time has gone on. Although it lies in the shadow of *Bases Loaded*, I believe it can stand on its own in many ways, even though the lack of a true season mode is a shame. This was supposed to be a one-two sports punch with *Tecmo Bowl*, but this title had to compete with 10 other baseball games that were already released, so it never stood much of a chance and languished. – PC

Tecmo Bowl

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Feb. 1989
Developer: Tecmo
Publisher: Tecmo
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★★⯪

In this nine-on-nine football game, the player takes control of one of 12 teams in order to win several games in a row on the way to the Tecmo Bowl Championship. The teams are based upon real NFL teams (location but no name) with real players and their own playbooks consisting of four offensive plays each. Players on all teams are rated with their own skill attributes based upon their real life counterparts. Both offense and defense select one of the four offensive plays shown, usually two passing and two running ones. The level of effective defensive coverage comes down to guesswork – if the defense chooses the same play as the offense, the play will be covered well and most likely be thwarted. The football gameplay is not simulation based, but rather reflects a quick arcade style that is very smooth. Players will fly in the air upon being hit, there are no fumbles, quarterbacks can throw 80 yards, and interceptions are far more likely than an incomplete pass. Controls are solid and make passing, running, and tackling quite simple and satisfying. Music, sound effects, and graphics are all very good and reflect a very polished title that is more than the sum of its parts. The presentation is also a positive, with small cutscenes for touchdowns as well as nice voice samples and even a half-time show. The two-player mode is an absolute blast to play, and there's even a coaching mode thrown in for good measure. While it lacks a true season mode and may not realistically depict football totally, this still is one of the most entertaining sports games on the NES.

Reflections: Gosh, is there any NES gamer who didn't play this game at least once as a kid? I have a feeling it was a secret requirement – like every twentieth time a child would play *Kid Icarus*, it would actually boot up *Tecmo Bowl* instead. I would always play as Los Angeles which had Bo Jackson at running back, who could run so much quicker than every other player on the field. I remember often playing with my friend Kevin, who would usually spank me by three touchdowns when we played. One time when choosing my offensive play, I glanced over and saw Kevin glancing down at my controller. No wonder Kevin was so good on defense, right? What a jerk. I hope he's working at a gas station now. – PC



Tecmo Cup Soccer Game

Tecmo Cup Football Game *(PAL)*
Genre: Sports, RPG
Release Date: Sept. 1992
Developer: Tecmo
Publisher: Tecmo
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★

In this cinematically driven and unique fusion of sports and RPG mechanics, players control Robin Field as he and his team work their way up to the World Cup in this strategic soccer game. Players on the team have different attributes for offensive and defensive abilities. At the whistle one must run up the field to the opposing goal and attempt to make a shot. This is shown with a large, detailed sprite of the character running on the top screen, with an inset map of the field and player location. Randomly, players from the other team may surround the player, at which point they must choose from a menu to shoot, pass, or attempt to dribble more. After a selection is made, the result plays out on screen and play resumes. The more opponents blocking the ball handler, higher the risk of a steal from more dribbling or a pass. Once a player is near enough to the goal they may open the menu and pick to shoot or even select a special power shot if they have earned one. Likewise on defense, players can select how to counter opponents at intervals, like cutting off a potential pass, marking ball-handlers, waiting, or attempting to slide tackle to steal the ball. When attempting to stop a shot with the goalie, players can select to either attempt to punch the shot or catch it. The game is fairly fun at first and very nice looking, but a few major problems really bring it down. One, when running up field there is no way to see where opposing players are. They are treated as random battles. The second issue is that when passing, one can't see the player on the map unless they are selected. Players will find themselves rotating through options a number of times due to this. It's an interesting concept with lots of potential that ends up feeling far too random. That said, the game does a surprisingly good job of staying tense and exciting, and is definitely a title that fans of truly different titles will stick with for a while.

Reflections: This is actually the first in the *Captain Tsubasa* line of video games that became quite popular in Japan. They actually spawned a sort of subgenre of soccer games that include *Inazuma Eleven* for the Nintendo DS and 3DS handhelds. As time goes on these become a very fun and interesting way to play a sports game, especially one like soccer which actually lends itself fairly well to this sort of approach. Unfortunately, the first game was obviously a testing ground as a number of key features are missing. – IF

Tecmo NBA Basketball

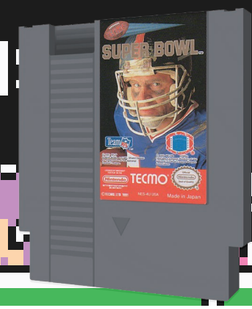
Genre: Sports
Release Date: Nov. 1992
Developer: Sculptured Software
Publisher: Tecmo
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

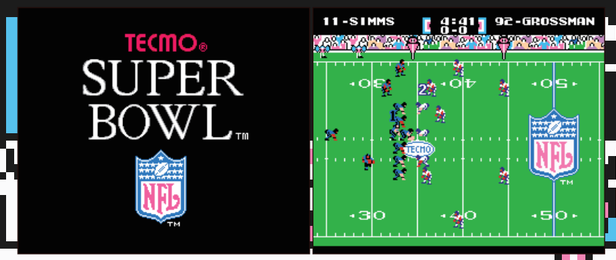
This basketball title features a full NBA team/player's license and rosters based upon the 1991-92 season. All players have individual defensive/offensive capabilities, such as shooting, passing, blocking, and stealing (although they are all appear as the same height on the court). An array of options is available, such as selecting the length of quarter and game speed. Starting players can even be selected for each team, as well as even four different offensive plays that can be run via START plus the D-pad. Besides exhibition and all-star games, a full season mode is available, with the player selecting which teams are run by humans, CPU, or coached by a human. On the actual court, the gameplay experience is mixed. While the graphics are nice and there are even some nice cutscenes when dunking, the controls are a little unorthodox and may take getting used to. Offense is fine, with A to pass, and B to take jumpers, three pointers, hooks, layups, and dunks. On defense, the A button is used to change players while the B button is used to steal, try for blocked shots, and jump for rebounds. However, it's unintuitive having the same button to both steal and block, and since B also shoots, at times you can regain the ball and then take a bad full court shot without realizing it. Far too many fast-breaks occur on both sides of the ball, and CPU teammates on defense aren't too useful, as they are usually easy to get around for a simple layup or dunk. Shooting, dunking, slapping away the ball on defense, blocking, and rebounding all look and feel good, however. While the gameplay can falter in places and often doesn't represent true NBA game action, the depth of features here is stout: full team season stats and tracking of league leaders, in-game player substitutions when they tire, fouls, and player injuries. While far from perfect, you won't find a more robust basketball experience on the NES.

Reflections: I owned the SNES version of this game, and when comparing the two you can really see the hardware differences. On the SNES, not only are the graphics/sound obviously superior, but also the computer AI isn't next to worthless. I spent many an hour playing the full season mode, and blocking 12 shots a game with Patrick Ewing on the NY Knicks. Then Ewing would usually pull a groin or get hypertension midway through the season, but that's too personal a tale for now. While the gameplay is expectantly inferior on the NES, the features and options are exactly the same. So while I sorta recommend this title, I truly recommend the SNES version, even though Tecmo couldn't exactly figure out player heights in that version either, though at least they weren't all the same. – PC

Tecmo Super Bowl

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Dec. 1991
Developer: Tecmo
Publisher: Tecmo
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★★





The gridiron sequel features all the official NFL teams and player rosters from the 1990-91 season, including individual player skill ratings. Each team has its own playbook, with the player being able to select eight offensive plays used in the game, as well as view the attributes (and facial images) of players, with the ability to swap out the offensive players. Play modes include the ability to play, watch, or coach (selecting plays only) single preseason games, Pro Bowl game, or the robust season mode. The season mode consists of a full regular season and playoffs for all 28 teams, with the ability to choose which teams are controlled by the player, coached, or which are CPU-controlled and skipped when playing each other. Besides team records, team rankings and offensive/defensive league leaders are tracked.

On the field, the gameplay is a sweet-spot combination of arcade and simulation-based play. The action takes place on a horizontal field, with the accurate count of 11 players per team. The players are relatively small to see them all and a portion of the field, but they all move very smoothly, are animated well, and there's very minor sprite flickering to be seen. The offensive team has a choice of eight plays to run, four passing and four running. The defensive team also selects one of the eight plays to cover. If they choose the exact play, it's almost guaranteed to be broken up. The level of coverage of offensive players otherwise depends on if the defense correctly chooses a run or passing play to cover.

The action itself is very arcade-like and quick. Players run at great speeds and often fly into the air when hit and blocked, passes can be thrown very far (with a simple receiver selection option), and tackling on defense is fun – occurring by running into players with the ball and struggling with them or by attempting a diving tackle. The games fly by at a brisk pace while also containing a degree of strategy in being smart about play selection and execution. The addition of many football elements missing from the original is greatly welcomed here, such as fumbles, passes off the mark, defenders tipping/blocking passes, receivers diving and jumping for balls, touchbacks on punts, offensive player injuries, and onside kicks. The presentation is outstanding. Besides touchdown celebrations and halftime shows, there are several short cutscenes intertwined sometimes with gameplay events, like interceptions, quarterback sacks, pass blocking attempts, field goal and extra point attempts, and more. The music tracks are energetic and perfectly complement the gameplay, and the graphics both on the field and in the cutscenes are well done. The level of depth in terms of both the on-the-field action and modes/features is brilliant and ground-breaking, resulting in a benchmark for all following console football games to aspire to. For sports fans, you're in for the ultimate pigskin treat.

Reflections: Tecmo achieved something that should not be understated here: combining a very fun arcade football experience with great simulation elements, real players/teams, and polished accoutrements that would have set the game apart from the other football games even by itself. *Tecmo Super Bowl* is still considered by a chunk of sports game fans to be the best football game of all time... not just on the NES or the 8-bit era, but of ALL TIME. It's strange that they would think that, and not for the superior SNES version released a couple years later, but I'll cut them some slack since it's not like they selected only an above-average game, but rather a near-perfect classic.

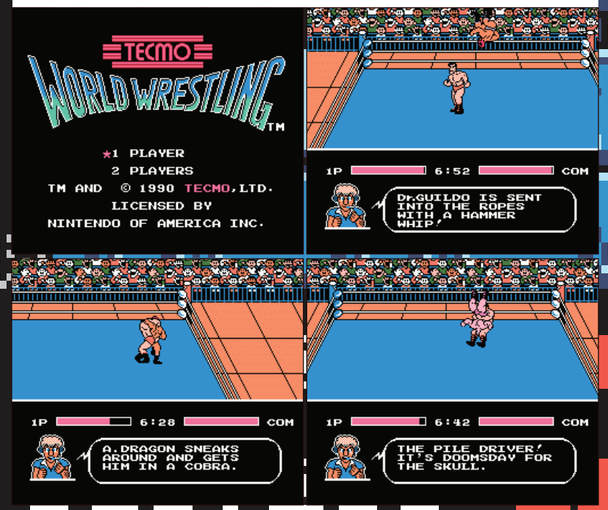
The NES cart's ROM is hacked/revised each and every year by a fervent fan community who go in and accurately update the team rosters for the new season (after adding/updating the newer teams, of course), the player stats, new schedule, etc., and then use the ROM in their own online league simulations. There are even tournaments set up each year for cash prizes, with players flying out to compete in them – the most famous taking place in Madison, Wisconsin (NFL Films did a mini-documentary on the event). Even if you're not a fan of sports or football, you should check out this title just to see how much class oozes out, and you'll probably end up liking the game any way. – PC

Tecmo World Wrestling

Genre: Wrestling
Release Date: Apr. 1990
Developer: Tecmo
Publisher: Tecmo
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

This ambitious pro wrestling game features a fairly deep 10-man roster with many moves available to each character. Most of the wrestlers are fictional representations of known legends, such as Antonio Inoki and Tiger Mask. Each player has access to various strike moves like punches, elbows, and knees, as well as running moves like a clothesline and a drop kick. When players are down, strikes, submissions, and pins may be attempted, and top rope moves are available. Both players colliding together when standing will result in a grapple. In a grapple, players must input a command such as UP + B or LEFT + A with precise timing to pull off stronger moves, such as brainbusters, suplexes, piledrivers, and body slams. Each character has a few specialty moves that will deal a large amount of damage, but require the opponent's energy meter to be worn down before they can be pulled off. For instance, Dr. Guildo can perform giant swings while Jackie Lee can perform German suplexes. These are presented very nicely, often with a cartoon cutscene if the move is performed at a crucial moment. Action mostly takes place in an isometric ring, but players can be thrown to the outside where the vantage point is around one of the corner ring posts, which can be used against an opponent. There is amusing text-based commentary during the matches that calls out the big moves and does a surprisingly decent job at keeping up with the match flow. The only real negative here is a lack of modes. Other than the requisite two-player versus matches, the single-player game is a straightforward fight through the different wrestlers. There is also a muscle training mode between matches that involves button-mashing. All the various exercises achieve the same result, more powerful attacks, but it's a cute addition. In the end, the timing may be a bit difficult to get accustomed to, as button-mashing when grappling is punished, but what is here is a great, tense wrestling game on the NES.

Reflections: This and *Pro Wrestling* are both fantastic and the only wrestling games worth playing on the system. I actually slightly prefer *Pro Wrestling* for its near-perfect balance of simplicity and fun, but Tecmo's game is as close to a *Fire Pro Wrestling* title as one will find on the system. – IF

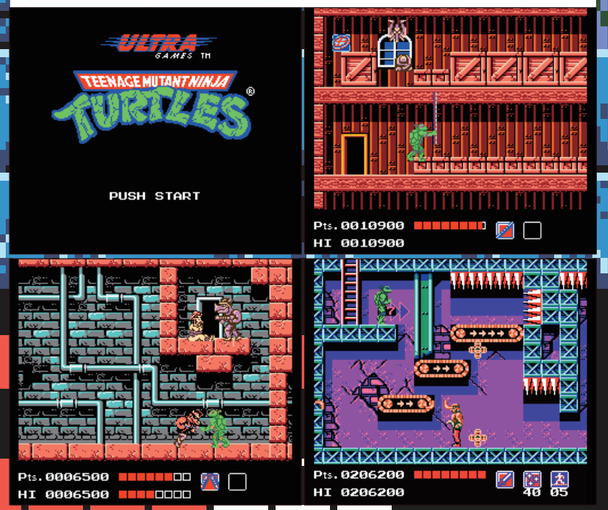


Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles

Teenage Mutant Hero Turtles *(PAL)*
Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: June 1989
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Ultra Games
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★⋆

As the four Ninja Turtles, players must rescue April O'Neil and battle the evil Shredder in this action-platformer based upon the hit cartoon series. Gameplay alternates between an overhead bird's-eye-view perspective where the player can advance and engage in simple combat or avoid enemy soldiers and vehicles. After reaching a building or sewer entrance, the main gameplay begins. Inside a building or underground, gameplay consists of controlling one of the four available Ninja Turtles as they hack and slash through the side-scrolling levels battling a multitude of diverse enemies such as foot soldiers, chainsaw-wielding enemies, various robots, flying enemies, and even monsters engulfed in flames. At any time, the player can pause the game and switch to one of the four playable characters, each with their own life meter and accompanying weapon which all vary in speed of attack and attack range. Players must be careful to keep each character healthy with pizza pick-ups since each Ninja Turtle is a single life in essence (they can be rescued in rare locations in the game if defeated). Secondary weapons such as throwing stars and ninja scrolls can be acquired to power up the player. Graphics, controls, music, and sound are all above par, and the game does a pretty good job of incorporating elements from the cartoon series, especially seen in the boss characters, or when controlling the Turtle Van or Turtle Blimp. Gameplay is very difficult in spots, due to the high volume of enemies encountered in enclosed areas, as well the fact that enemies can re-spawn when traveling back over or when re-entering the same areas. The controls are not as fine-tuned as they could be to make up for this difficulty, especially jumping controls, which will make later stages very formidable for most players. It's a competent Ninja Turtles experience, if not outstanding.

Reflections: TMNT was HUGE at the time, so of course everybody had to own this game. In fact, this title was one of the most successful third-party titles on the system. While not a port of the excellent *TMNT* arcade beat 'em up, this game was still well received and rightfully so. While not perfect, it provided a proper TMNT experience and was not a cash-in in any way. This title unfortunately suffers from a bit of revisionist history in modern times with people thinking it was horrible (much of that due to the second stage dam-swimming level, which is lamented as very difficult when it's not). But when it was first released, it was very popular and well-thought-of. – PC



Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles II: The Arcade Game

Teenage Mutant Hero Turtles II: The Arcade Game *(PAL)*
Genre: Beat 'em Up
Release Date: Dec. 1990
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Ultra Games
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⋆

This expanded port of the classic arcade beat 'em up has our four turtle heroes rescuing April O'Neil and trying to defeat villains Shredder and Krang. Up to two players can pick their favorite turtle and clear each stage of Foot Clan members as well as a boss based on iconic enemies like Rocksteady and Baxter Stockman. Each Foot member is color coded according to what they can do, from tossing boomerangs to wielding hammers, while each boss follows a pattern that must be exploited so as to take minimal damage. Other enemies from the show appear, and seeing enemies like Mousers and sentry robots gives the game a fantastic cartoon feel. Players have a basic weapon attack, jump kick, and a jumping weapon attack at their disposal, and using them effectively is key to making the most of each life. Unfortunately, fighting in the game doesn't feel particularly smooth. The basic attack is simply one or two repeating weapon swipes which results in clunky, staccato combat, with some swipes passing through enemies. Strategy is mostly centered on constant jump kicks when played in single-player mode, which makes for fairly dry gameplay despite exciting environments. The difficulty is fairly high, but pizza health pick-ups and limited continues help our turtles soldier on. While not as smooth or varied as it could be, this home version adds a whole new level and changes some segments and bosses to make it a fun enough brawler in its own right, certainly with a second player.

Reflections: It's remarkable when a pop culture juggernaut gets a fun and faithful game adaptation, but Konami's arcade *TMNT* games get everything right. The home release was a big enough deal to get Pizza Hut's in-game branding on the pizza boxes, and some copies even had coupons for personal pan pizzas. Beat 'em ups with limited continues are harsh, but they teach pattern recognition in enemies really well. It took my buddy and me all summer to beat this in the allotted attempts, but there was definite satisfaction in the accomplishment. – IF

I'll admit, I was an arcade snob when it came to this game. The *TMNT* arcade game was a huge favorite of mine, so I was very disappointed when this port came out. Particularly, I could not stand how staccato and stiff the attacks were compared to the silky smooth attack combos of the arcade version. My friends all thought I was crazy. F 'em. Those 10-year-olds settled for imperfection. – PC

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles III: The Manhattan Project

Genre: Beat 'em Up
Release Date: Feb. 1992
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Konami
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★

The third entry in the *TMNT* series for the NES is a two-player capable, side-scrolling beat 'em up that has our heroes going from beaches to the floating island of Manhattan in their attempt to save April and the city from the clutches of Shredder. Each turtle is moved around a three-quarter view level. Attacking is handled with the B button and jumping with A. Each of the four selectable turtle characters uses their signature weapons and also has a special attack triggered by pressing A + B that depletes a bar of life on their meter, but can take out huge hordes of foes when surrounded, making it a strategic trade-off. Other moves, such as the ability to toss enemies via weapon jab (B + DOWN) to knock out other foes, or jump kicks that keep turtles in the air and out of danger, add variety and round out a respectable arsenal of moves. Graphics are clean and capture the cartoony atmosphere of the show wonderfully, and the variety of foot soldiers (some carrying spears, throwing stars, boomerangs, and other weapons) keeps the gameplay fresh. Other popular enemies such as Mousers appear, and iconic enemies such as Rocksteady, Bebop, and Leatherhead fill the roles of the bosses. Levels have a touch of variety as well – a great example being the second level where the turtles surf on rocket boards to the next stage while fighting pursuing helicopters. Music is exceptionally good, with familiar themes and new tunes alike being among the best Konami achieved on the system. The game is a long one at eight levels, longer than most beat 'em ups, and is a nice change of pace from similar titles. The difficulty is quite high, however, and some of the fighting can feel stiff, especially if the player doesn't try to mix things up with tosses and jumps. Regardless of these minor gripes, this is still a great, well-rounded action game with an excellent integration of the license. It's good on its own but even better with a friend.

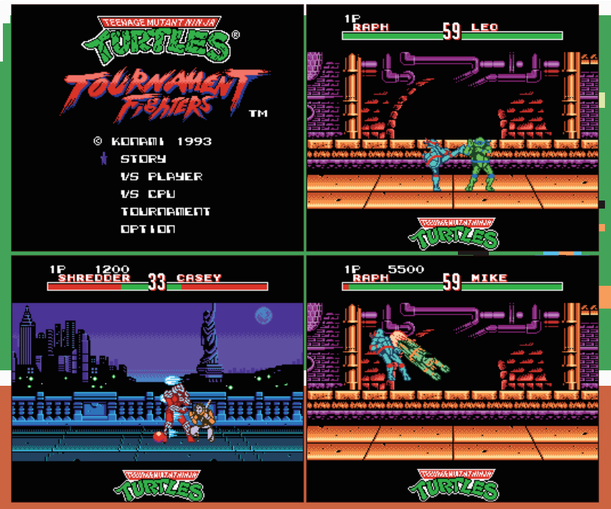
Reflections: From the beaches to floating cities, I enjoyed the locales and action of this far better than I did its predecessor. It's a great game nearing the end of the system's lifespan, and it's nice to see Konami didn't churn out a quick cash grab with the *TMNT* brand, because they most certainly could have gotten away with it. – IF

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Tournament Fighters

Teenage Mutant Hero Turtles: Tournament Fighters *(PAL)*
Genre: Fighting
Release Date: Feb. 1994
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Konami
Players: 1–4 (2 simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Rare
★★★★⯪

In this one-on-one fighting game, players take control of one of four Ninja Turtles (Leonardo, Michelangelo, Donatello, or Raphael) in the story mode and must defeat the other three before taking on Casey Jones, Hot Head, and finally the evil Shredder. Gameplay takes place on a single horizontal plane, with players being able to move forward and back, jump, crouch, attack, and block. The different characters move and jump with different speeds and inflict different amounts of damage when attacking. The game is two out of three rounds, with a round won when one of the fighters' energy meters is depleted. The characters control similarly, with B punching and A kicking, with jumping and crouching variations available for both. A close attack/throw is available by getting close to the opponent and pressing B, as well as a charge attack by tapping forward twice then pressing A or B. Each character also has at least one special attack, which are unleashed with a specific D-pad charge and button combination unique to each special move. There is an additional special move available to each character in the form of a fireball that can be picked up by any fighter when it is dropped from above and then thrown with a semi-circle D-pad + B button combination. Blocking attacks is performed by pressing back away from the opponent on the D-pad, although blocking special attacks will reduce the energy meter a little. Control is very polished, with all the attacks and special moves easy to pull off. Graphics and animation are both very nice – a great example of the refinement of the system in its late life. It's a shame that three characters are not selectable in the story mode. However, a CPU or two-player versus mode are available with any fighter selectable, as well as a nice four-player tournament mode. Options such as adjusting the difficulty, time of rounds, and an optional turbo speed round out this finely-tuned and well-thought-out fighter.

Reflections: This was mostly played on the SNES and Genesis, where those versions were obviously superior in every way. However, it's not like the NES can do much better in the fighting genre (would you rather play *Karate Champ*?). I played this during the 1994 Blockbuster Video World Game Championship, where players would qualify at their local store over the course of a week or so on either the Genesis or SNES. On the SNES, I played *NBA Jam*, *TMNT: Tournament Fighters*, and *Clayfighter: Tournament Edition*. My final score was 63,800 in case you were wondering. I didn't become the Store Champion because I sucked it up on *NBA Jam*, choking worse than John Starks in game seven of the 1994 NBA finals. Wait, that game took place three days after I played at Blockbuster (June 19, 1994). Did I end up cursing the NY Knicks championship attempt with my awful performance?! This will haunt me until I review a simple black box sports game! – PC

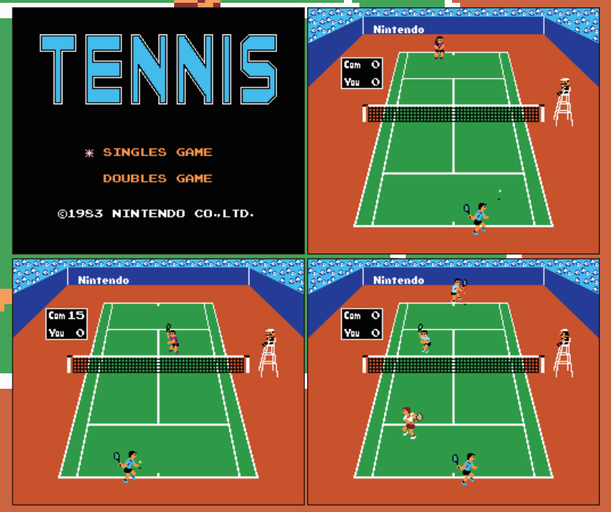


Tennis

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Oct. 1985
Developer: Nintendo R&D1
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1–2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

This simple tennis game consists of a single-player match for two out of three sets, or a two-player co-op doubles match against the computer. Gameplay is smooth on the court, where the player has the ability to quickly skitter around and reach every ball, swinging normally with A or attempting a lob shot with B. Players can control the direction of the shot somewhat by swinging earlier to pull the ball, or waiting to slice it in the opposite direction. There's also the ability to go to the net to attempt volley shots. The general gameplay of serving, swinging, and returning all work fine, but there's no chance to show off any technical finesse, since the players are so fast and the court so small, resulting in being able to run down almost any ball with little chance of a passing shot. Because of that, the vast majority of points will be due to either error, running into the ball, or the computer somehow swinging and missing shots that they shouldn't. There's the ability to alter the CPU difficulty, but besides that, there's not a reason to play too long. Its rudimentary charm can be cute, but anyone looking to scratch a serious tennis itch should look elsewhere.

Reflections: *Tennis*, one of the original black box games and a launch title, isn't bad by any stretch of the imagination, but that doesn't mean it's good, either. It plays almost like a glorified game of *Pong*, the more I think about it, except in *Pong*, you can make passing shots. Conspicuous in his presence is the judge, Mario, who obviously is not making enough from plumbing to take on this second job. Unclogging toilets, restoring peace to the Mushroom Kingdom, and judging tennis action – the man can do it all! – PC



The Terminator

Genre: Action
Release Date: Dec. 1992
Developer: Radical Entertainment
Publisher: Mindscape
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★⯪

Kyle Reese is a rebel from the future where a sentient artificial intelligence, Skynet, is battling against humanity for domination. Kyle must follow a humanoid killing machine, referred to as the Terminator, into the past to prevent the murder of Sarah Connor, mother of rebel leader John Connor, before he is born. Most of the game is a platformer where Kyle can shoot enemies from afar (in the future) or punch and kick (in the past). His foes range from robots and turrets to other humans and dogs. Sometimes, the goal of the stage is simply to reach an endpoint; in others, Kyle must complete a task, such as finding Sarah in the police station. Additionally, there are driving stages where Kyle shoots his robotic adversary as it does its best to mow him down on his way to a new destination, following the basic storyline of the titular 1984 movie. If his precious life bar at the top is drained or he falls down a pit, he loses a life, and when Kyle runs out completely, it's game over, plain and simple - no continues. While the game attempts to tell the movie's story, the controls and extreme difficulty prevent any immersion. The graphics are poor and unappealing, with a small range of assets used repeatedly throughout a stage. This is a huge letdown, especially for a release so late in the console's life. It's nice to see the pixelated faces of Arnold Schwarzenegger and Linda Hamilton, but it hardly makes up for the disappointment of this experience.

Reflections: If there's one thing I expect from a *Terminator* game, it's running around shooting enemies, which you get a little taste of in the first area, but it's awkward not being able to move with a gun in hand. One aspect that I didn't touch on was the music, which sounds like a discordant mash of bloops and bleeps, but I can at least get a sense of the dystopian and tense environment they were trying to convey. While enjoying the movie may convince you to try this game, I doubt this title would conversely have anyone looking forward to a film about a blocky man who fights off a robotic takeover with his fists, feet, and a few softly lobbed baseballs. Might I instead suggest a sojourn to the star system of Silius? – KY

Terminator 2: Judgment Day

Genre: Action
Release Date: Feb. 1992
Developer: Software Creations
Publisher: LJN
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

This adaptation of the smash-hit action movie follows the film's plot of the T-800 who travels back in time to protect John and Sarah Connor and save the future. Five different levels are presented with different gameplay styles/goals. The first level is a beat 'em up level where the player has to use fists to take out bikers and other thugs. It's easy to get overwhelmed if the player's not careful. The second level is a short but difficult isometric racing level where the T-800 has to outrun a tanker truck behind him on a motorcycle by firing a shotgun backwards at the truck and also forward to open closed gates. The third level requires the player to search out keycards in rooms to get access to elevators to eventually find Sarah Connor, all while fending off enemies by shooting them in the leg (shooting them elsewhere results in less points). The fourth level requires the player to collect 10 explosive barrels from rooms in multiple floors in Cyberdyne and then set them to explode. The final, most difficult level requires the player to precariously platform in a steel mill while trying to avoid falling to instant death via molten steel. The T-1000 awaits for a final battle if players can reach it. The entire experience is a mixed bag. The controls are smooth, the different level objectives are nice, and the adherence to the movie's plot is admirable. The difficulty can be tough, though, especially since ammo is limited and enemies will constantly swarm on levels three and four. There are also a few jumps on the final level that are a bit unfair in their precise requirements, but when you lose a life, you continue where you left off, which cushions the blow. The attention to detail here is nice, with both the pause/level start screens seen in the red hue of the Terminator's perspective, and upon death the screen distorts with TV "snow." Fans of the movie will get more mileage out of the experience for sure, but it's not without its positive merits.

Reflections: *Terminator 2* was absolutely huge in the summer of 1991. It was the most popular movie that summer, with tons of movie tie-in merchandise, publicity, and even toys. That's not a surprise for most movies, but it sure is for a very violent R-rated movie. But, like most kids that summer, I ended up watching it. Seeing the T-1000 stab people in the head didn't make me some sort of psychopath, right? Be right back, I have to go shine my throwing knives collection. – PC

Terra Cresta

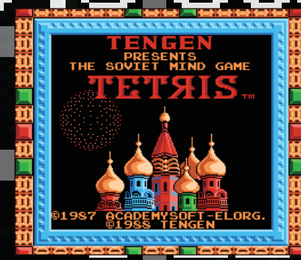
Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Mar. 1990
Developer: Nihon Bussan
Publisher: Vic Tokai
Players: 1-2
Special Features: Edit Mode
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★★

The organization Terra Cresta must defeat the devil Mandora to take back Earth in this vertically scrolling shooter. Players start with ship number one, fairly underpowered, but can gain ships two to five throughout the levels by destroying the numbered icons and combining with the revealed ships. Each time the ships combine, the more powerful the larger ship becomes, with a double shot, more firepower, the ability to fire backwards, and a back shield. Combining all five ships will turn the player's ship into an invincible phoenix for a limited time. Each time the ship is struck by an enemy or fire, a part of the ship will be destroyed. If the player is hit with only ship number one, the player loses a life. Gameplay is smooth and very fast, usually with multiple air targets whipping around and firing quickly, as well as destroyable ground targets, including gun emplacements and dinosaurs. Overall, the enemy and level design aren't the most interesting, but it's extremely engaging, as are the very challenging bosses who fire lots of bullets at the player at one time. If the player feels overwhelmed, they can split the combined ships into a formation for a short time (up to three times per gained ship); this covers the screen in a lot more shots while making only the small ship number one vulnerable to attack. There's not a lot of levels here and they're not too different from one another, and the game will loop after defeating Mandora. Still, what is here, although somewhat simple, is extremely well done, and will satisfy the cravings of shooter fans. A nice bonus mode to create your own ship formations and even the direction of fire of the split ships is an unexpected but nice touch to complete the package.

Reflections: The formation edit mode is a very cool addition, and something I've never seen in another shooter. It allows the player to customize their mode of attacking to maximize their play style in the game. It's essential in the boss battles to use the formation split option, otherwise the "bullet hell" can be overwhelming, especially with the larger hit box of a combined ship. The game just loops with no end because it's an arcade shooter, but I'll give it a pass here this time. I'm feeling generous right now. – PC

Tetris

Genre: Puzzle
Release Date: May 1989
Developer: Atari Games
Ported by: Tengen
Publisher: Tengen
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★½



Players have to maneuver and stack block pieces to form horizontal lines to eliminate rows in this revolutionary puzzle game. A rectangular play field is 10 squares wide by 20 squares high. One at a time, at the top of the field, the player will be given one of seven tetromino pieces (consisting of four square blocks each), shaped like a square, "z," backwards "z," "L," backwards "L," "t," and an "I" piece. As the pieces fall from the top, the player can move them laterally and rotate them 90 degrees counter-clockwise using B and clockwise using A. DOWN will drop the piece at a faster rate until it stacks on a block below it. The object is to fill in gaps to complete a horizontal line, which will eliminate that line from the screen and drop any higher blocks down in the process. The game ends when the pieces are allowed to accumulate and stack to the top of the play field. Strategies and moments for successfully filling gaps based upon the seven specific pieces becomes apparent very quickly, with some scenarios more beneficial for using one block versus another. Scoring increases for eliminating two and three lines a time, but is dramatically greater for eliminating four lines at once, otherwise known as a "Tetris." This can only be accomplished by building up four lines with a single vertical gap remaining to fit in the long "I" piece to complete it (when and if it becomes available). The action is simultaneously frenetic and analytical, requiring adept hand-eye coordination to properly place pieces while also being able to puzzle-solve on the fly on a moment-to-moment basis in a constantly changing field. The player is able to preview what the next piece is going to be before it is available – a brilliant design element that allows for planning ahead and setting up different types of scoring strategies. It's simple in concept, but there are very advanced strategies that can be learned and employed, such as nudging pieces horizontally into position underneath a block above, rotating pieces to fit in tight spots, and identifying spots/gaps where parts of pieces of a troublesome current piece can be "burned off" with a line elimination to open up gaps immediately afterwards to allow for a double-, triple-, or four-line score with the following piece.

This version of the game offers a few different gameplay modes. The single-player mode is an endurance mode where players must complete lines successfully until the game eventually ends, with the ability to choose a starting level (speed of blocks falling) and starting stack of blocks. The game will increase speed after every 30 lines completed, with a pause in the action to see miniscule dancers entertain for a spell. Fortunately, the smooth controls allow for players to play competently to their skill level. There's also a nice competitive mode against either the computer or a second player, with two different play fields for each player where both players receive the same pieces. An experimental but fun cooperative mode is also available to played with another player or the computer as a partner. Four different background songs or silence can be selected during the game for ambience. While it's slightly bland graphically, this version of the classic puzzle game controls smoothly and has a lot to offer fans of the genre.

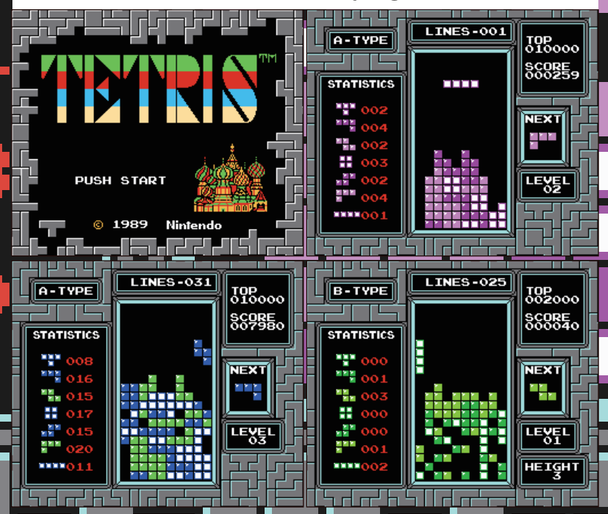
Reflections: Developed by Russian Alexey Pajitnov, *Tetris* was developed in 1984 and was eventually ported over to various PC and gaming platforms through convoluted and semi-confusing licensing rights agreements that took place in the USSR. Atari ended up with the right to produce the game, but only the arcade version, and unbeknownst to them, not for home game consoles in the United States. The console rights went to Nintendo, but there was a small problem: Atari's NES publisher Tengen was already producing an unlicensed console version and released it. Being that Nintendo was planning their own version of the game, this obviously caused some turmoil, resulting in a lawsuit that pitted Nintendo against Atari. Nintendo won out, resulting in a court order to have all the Tengen *Tetris* copies removed from store shelves. Because of this, the Tengen version is a little hard to come by, even though some view the arcade port as the superior NES version due to the smoother controls and multiplayer modes. What version do you think is better? Let me know in the comments below! ... Wait, this is a book. It's a noninteractive medium. My bad. – PC

Tetris

Genre: Puzzle
Release Date: Nov. 1989
Developer: Nintendo R&D1
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★★½

In this puzzle title, players have to drop, rotate, and shift block pieces into a rectangular field to make complete horizontal lines to eliminate them. This title is nearly identical to the previously released Tengen version, with the exception of the graphics, music, and sounds. Please see the previous page for a description/review of the gameplay experience. This version of the game offers two gameplay modes. Mode A is an endurance mode where players must complete lines successfully until the game eventually ends, with the ability to choose a starting level (speed of blocks falling). The game will increase speed after every tenth line completed. Mode B tasks the player to complete 25 lines, with the player being able to select the level of the game (which does not change) as well as the starting block height. Both modes allow for selecting one of three very catchy songs to be listened to as players shift and rotate blocks to their hearts' content. While the lack of a two-player mode is disappointing, the single-player mode is so technically sound in both design and function that puzzle game fans and casual gamers alike will delight to the grandfather of the genre.

Reflections: While the Atari/Tengen version of *Tetris* was released first, after Nintendo's lawsuit removed that version from store shelves, Nintendo's version would go on to dominate as *the* definitive puzzle game of the 8-bit era. Nintendo smartly decided to make *Tetris* the pack-in game for their handheld Game Boy system, released in the summer of 1989. This decision caused the Game Boy to fly off the shelves, as both the system and this game were successfully marketed towards players of all ages, and both male and female gamers alike. And that's the beauty of *Tetris* – it's the rare game that has universal appeal while also having no decipherable story nor a character/mascot to identify with. It's the king of the puzzle genre, with a simplicity of concept and a "pick up and play" feel combined with a genius level of complexity that no puzzle game has seemingly come close to emulating since. It's highly unlikely that the vast popularity of Tetris will ever be matched by another puzzle game. The NES version of *Tetris* has unofficially become the "classic" version of the game over the years, due to the fact that not only was this version far more plentiful and popular than the pulled Tengen release, but also due to the fact that this game comprised the bulk of the Nintendo World Championships 1990 competition and game cart. I actually had the honor of hosting the Classic Tetris World Championship in 2010, but that was another lifetime and hairstyle ago. – PC



Tetris 2

Genre: Puzzle
Release Date: Oct. 1993
Developer: Nintendo R&D1
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

This sequel to the classic puzzle title is a bummer, released during the flood of titles trying to capitalize on the booming genre's popularity. The goal is to position the sometimes bizarrely shaped tetrominoes onto bomb blocks in each stage. They are dropped one at a time and can be moved laterally as well as rotated counterclockwise and clockwise with B and A, respectively. The tetrominoes are multicolored by segment, and lining up three segments of the same color vertically or horizontally will cause them to disappear, taking like-colored bomb blocks with them. Clearing all the bomb blocks will move the player on to the next stage. If the pieces reach the top of the bin, it's game over. The title suffers from the problems of other "me too" games of the era by over complicating the design as opposed to coming up with something streamlined, unique, and fun. The errors of trying too hard are extremely visible from the unnecessarily complex pieces and the mixing of conflicting mechanics. The immediate desire with tetrominoes is to fit them together in snug formations, which goes against the central play mechanic of destroying bombs to clear levels. Simpler pieces would work much better for this sort of gameplay, instead of the disconnected and segmented pieces seen here. The graphics are surprisingly drab for a title released as late as this was on the NES. While the tunes are okay, they won't be getting stuck in anyone's head. A two-player competitive mode versus human or CPU player is included, but it makes this one even messier. It's a playable title but isn't fun, and it just never clicks with the pieces and the goal mixing like oil and water.

Reflections: This is a mess. *Dr. Mario* perfectly nailed the basic "match three" elimination concept years prior and *Tetris* never needed any improvement on its formula. So obviously mixing these two great tastes must yield incredible results! Or maybe it's just a tepid cash-in on a popular name. – IF

I remember the commercial for this game quite clearly, with the voiceover saying, "And this time, there's bombs in it." Too bad the game itself was a bomb. Hiyoooo! – PC

The Three Stooges

Genre: Action
Release Date: Oct. 1989
Developer: Cinemaware
Ported by: Beam Software
Publisher: Activision
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

This interesting collection of wacky mini-games is based upon the famous comedy trio. As the Stooges, the player has 30 days to earn at least $5,000 to save an old woman's orphanage by taking on odd jobs via a board game-type menu. A hand moves randomly left and right on what's supposed to be squares of classified ads. The player stops the hand and selects the activity for that day/move. These include pie-fighting, go-karting in a hospital to the surgery room, grabbing soup crackers from ornery oysters, and running to get a radio to save a boxing Curly. The mini-games themselves are shallow, but they are all faithfully based on Three Stooges escapades from their famous short films. The highlight is probably the pie fight for pure fun, but the most money can be made through the tedious cracker-eating (if you're sharp). There are also random squares (both good and bad) that can result in cash or a wasted day, and even a Three Stooges trivia game the player can answer for money. To slow down the gradually increasing speed of the selection hand on the main screen, you can even engage in a fun mini-game where Moe slaps and eye gouges Larry and Curly. The presentation is top-notch here, featuring excellent digital images of the Stooges as well as voice samples direct from the films – some of the best samples in the entire NES library. There isn't a huge amount of replayability, but what is here is a very quirky and unique game, and a "must play" for fans of *The Three Stooges*.

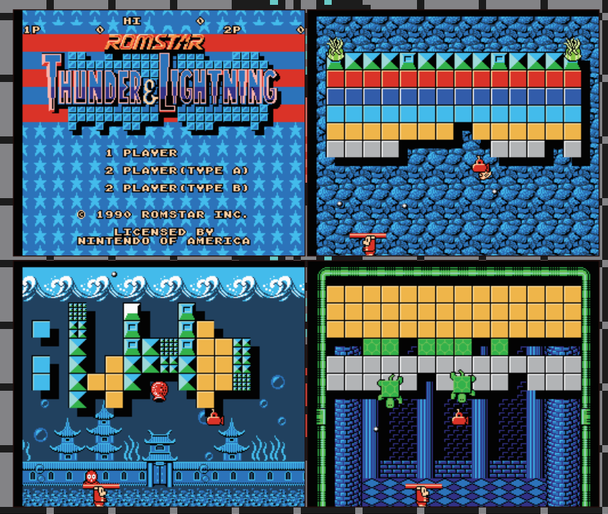
Reflections: I loved The Three Stooges as a kid. We used to tape the New Year's marathons they'd have every year. One year I mistakenly taped over some of the episodes and it took months for my father to forgive me. Horrible memories aside, I was absolutely shocked to see this game featured in *Nintendo Power*'s "Pak Watch." It didn't come out until about seven months later or so, so I had time to save up about half a year's allowance in order to buy it for $49.99 at Electronics Boutique. That night, after coming home from the huge Woodbridge Center mall, I remember being depressed that the game wasn't some linear platformer like every other title that was out on the system (that was a lot of mowed lawns and garbage I had to take to the curb to save up for the game, after all). But I quickly learned to love the game, and it has been a favorite ever since. How can you not like a game that tricks the player in the beginning into thinking it's another game by pretending to be *Ghostbusters II*? – PC

Thunder & Lightning

Genre: Paddle-and-Ball
Release Date: Dec. 1990
Developer: SETA
Ported by: Visco
Publisher: Romstar
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★½

In this fun take on the classic brick-breaking genre, instead of taking control of a paddle, players will guide a little man, Mr. Chin, through the many crazy brick patterns as he bounces the ball off the plank he holds above his head. Mr. Chin must keep the ball from falling off the bottom of the screen while clearing the stage of bricks and enemies above. Holding the B button allows for faster movement to reach balls on the opposite side of the screen before they are missed. Power-ups such as missiles, a large destructive ball, multiple balls, and so on can be found by defeating oddly undersea-themed adversaries. Players can also play a standard turn-taking, two-player game or a more original and fun simultaneous game where players can't cross each other, which requires fun and frantic communication. While the title offers very little new to this type of game, it plays very nicely and looks good to boot. The largest problem is the control input, which lacks a certain happy medium in speed, and some missed balls feel as though they had no chance of being bounced back up onto the brick-filled playfield.

Reflections: As fun as this game is, I have a tough time playing any *Breakout* clone without some sort of spinner control. I thought I was a genius when I plugged my *Arkanoid* Vaus spinner controller into my NES, only to have my hopes dashed when the game of course failed to put it to use. – IF



Thunderbirds

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Sept. 1990
Developer: Pack-In-Video
Publisher: Activision
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

In this vertical shooter based upon the 1960s British marionette show, players take control of one of several Thunderbirds vehicles in the air, on land, and underwater in different stages. The vehicle controlled by the player is married to its overhead stage(s), which is selected by a player in a somewhat nonlinear fashion via a world menu. While the vehicles, like planes and driller vehicles, look different and have a different looking primary attack, they all control and play similarly. Power-ups include being able to increase the primary attack's damage and ship's ability to take damage, having up to two connected drones, and collecting up to five drone options to change which direction they fire via A, including being able to rotate them around the ship to protect it. There aren't any lives, but an overall day time limit that will dwindle with each stage played and life lost. While technically sound, the game doesn't really stand out in any real way, as enemies and boss characters are standard-fare and uninspired. The story that connects the stages is nice but also drab. It may be worth a playthrough to some shooter fans.

Reflections: This is a very strange choice for an NES license. While popular in the 1960s and I'm sure still in reruns at the time of this game's release, this was not a strong enough license to warrant an NES game. I think Nintendo of America realized this, since if you look at the box art you would see no connection to the television show, and they even put a picture of an actual person on the back instead of a marionette.

Let's be honest, the *Thunderbirds* show is creepy. Marionettes in general are weird, but the fact that all the show's pilots are brothers and the sons of the head honcho is kinda skeevy. The game's developers made an interesting/strange choice not to have a traditional "lives" system but rather a 60-day countdown which would decrease for each stage completed and each time a vehicle is destroyed. If I cared enough I would have calculated out how many lives the 60 days actually came out to be, but I'm zoning out already writing this. – PC

Thundercade

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: July 1989
Developer: SETA
Ported by: Micronics
Publisher: American Sammy
Players: 1–2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

Prepare for rip-roaring motorcycle action in this vertically scrolling shooter. Players will combat tanks, enemy soldiers, helicopters, and the like with a machine gun or by calling in a bomber strike (via limited secondary weapon) to ineffectively spatter the screen with explosions, which will miss enemies half the time. Power-ups are available by destroying enemies, buildings, and plant life that can result in a sidecar addition or two for extra firepower (with different pick-ups to shoot forward or to the side) or strengthening your guns. Not all buildings can be destroyed, so at times the screen will be limited in the amount of movement due to the obstacles. Decent boss battles await the player at the end of stages. Two-player simultaneous action is available to share the unintense experience. There's passable action, but the drab graphics, below average music, and uninteresting scenery make this a yawner.

Reflections: This is the type of game that I think could have only either been purchased by accident or by an uncle or grandparent who didn't know any better. There's nothing particularly wrong with the game, but this isn't exactly a standout title, it's not any sort of licensed property, the arcade game it's based on no one has played, and it's an "attack motorcycle" concept of all things. "Awww gee, thanks Uncle Joe! I would much rather have *Thundercade* than *Contra*!" – PC

Tiger Heli

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Sept. 1987
Developer: Toaplan
Ported by: Micronics
Publisher: Acclaim Entertainment
Players: 1–2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★⋆

In this simple, vertically scrolling shooter, players maneuver the helicopter through four different war zones while destroying tanks, helicopters, and boats while uncovering bonus points in the destructible terrain. Graphics are fairly nice and there is some good use of color that keeps everything from looking too drab. After the fourth level the game begins to loop back to level two and will continue to do this until the player loses all of his lives. Weapons are fairly basic with players having a standard shot and a limited number of scatter bombs at their disposal. Tiny option helicopters can be obtained that either fire straight ahead or to the side depending on their color. These can be destroyed by enemy fire, which protects the player from one-hit death. At the end of each level, bonuses are applied for remaining bombs and whether any mini helis have made it to the end, so skillful play is rewarded despite simple appearances. There's nothing too horribly wrong with the game but the choppy scrolling and sluggish pace don't do it any favors.

Reflections: Simplistic shooters from this era generally made up for their limitations by having very fast-paced and smooth gameplay with fairly relentless enemy patterns. These games still scratch a good old-fashioned score attack itch. While *Tiger Heli* is admirable for being different (and for having fairly fun arcade and PC Engine versions), the NES port simply gets boring too quickly. – IF

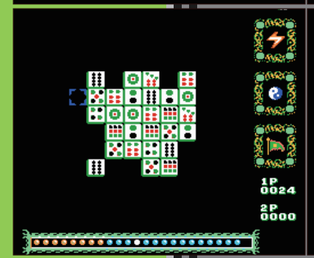
What sort of rules of war exist in this game? You can blow up what looks like a suburban neighborhood all willy-nilly. "Roger that. Taking out the grammar school and 7-Eleven and then returning to base." I feel bad for all those folks who had their Nissan Sentras destroyed by helicopter bullets. My childhood friend Vincent had *Tiger Heli*. I remember being annoyed that the game would never end, being that I was such a boss at it. I also fondly remember the 12 FPS webcam-esque action. Vincent also had a Roll 'n Rocker controller, but the less said about that the better. – PC

Tiles of Fate

Genre: Puzzle
Release Date: 1990
Developer: Computer & Entertainment
Publisher: American Video Entertainment
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

In order to restore order to China, players must match and eliminate boards of tiles in this puzzle title. In timed rounds, players are presented with a screen of tiles with various Chinese symbols. Players are tasked to match tiles by connecting them with less than two right angle turns, and without passing through other tiles. Eliminating the tiles will open up new possible pathways to connect and match more tiles to eventually clear the board. It's easier said than done, since from the start there are very few matches that can be eliminated, and many tiles are very similar in look to one another. Clearing some tiles will reveal three different power-ups known as "Forces of Fate." These can be collected for one-time use and include the ability to eliminate brick walls, one that will eliminate a matching tile that could not normally be accessed, and one that will randomly eliminate two matching tiles. It's not an unfun experience, but the challenge only comes from deciphering the different symbols from one another, and figuring out which pairs of available matching symbols to eliminate, since clearing the wrong one may create an impasse, preventing more matches unless a power-up is available to use. It's not terribly deep, but an acceptable, no-frills puzzle jaunt.

Reflections: It seems the simpler the game, the more likely it's an AVE title that won't get screwed up. It's a game of Mahjong, but not really – and the bizarre nature of conquering sections of China makes it just quirky enough for me to want to give it a whirl. – PC



Time Lord

Genre: Action
Release Date: Sept. 1990
Developer: Rare
Publisher: Milton Bradley
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★

Aliens are attempting to wreck human history by traveling back to different time periods in this action title, and it's up to the player to stop them. Gameplay takes place in a handful of different time periods: the future, medieval England, the Old West, France during World War II, and on a pirate ship in the 1600s. Each time period has stage-appropriate enemies as well as weapons that can be picked up to counter them, like a sword in medieval times and a shotgun in the Old West. Players will traverse the levels both horizontally and vertically on different planes, and the goal is to find five orbs; four are strewn throughout each level, and the fifth can be obtained after defeating the stage boss. Controls are mostly smooth and taking out enemies with different weapons can fun, but issues arise in the placement of the orbs. Some are out in the open, but some can only be gained in a strange manner: attacking spots around the orb or the orb itself to propel the player off the ground and up to try and collect the orb. How and where to hit these spots is obtuse, though, and even worse are some orbs that are hidden in spots or are only revealed when walking to a certain place. This sort of exploring and backtracking acoss levels puts the player at constant risk for damage since enemies respawn and health replenishment packs aren't plentiful. There's only three lives and no continues, and on top of all this, there's a cumulative time limit to complete the game, which clocks in at just under 25 minutes. There's an interesting premise here and some decent presentation in the various time periods. However, the strange gameplay design choices and over-the-top difficulty make this one to skip.

Reflections: Such a solid concept here that Rare utterly dropped the ball on. As cool as "time traveling" is for a video game idea, it's strange that only besides the bad *Back to the Future* 1 and 2/3 is *Time Lord* to complete a trilogy of chrono-ineptitude. If you just took away the overarching time limit, extended the game a couple more levels, and made the orbs easier to obtain, you'd potentially have a game that a lot of NES fans would still be talking about, other than asking themselves how this below average game managed to sell as many copies as it did. I'm not kidding when I spoke about the difficulty. The second stage boss, for example, is a large sombrero-wearing fellow (who looks like a *giant red pepper*) who took easily over 100 shots from my revolver to be put down. That's not stretching the truth – it was drawn out longer than most boss battles, but with none of the excitement that's needed in order to keep a player interested for something that grueling. – PC

Times of Lore

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: May 1991
Developer: Origin Systems
Ported by: Unknown
Publisher: Toho
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★

The Kingdom of Albareth is missing its king, and it's up to the player to restore peace to the fragmented land. After choosing either to play as a barbarian, valkyrie, or knight (with slight differences in speed and attack strength), the player is tasked to seek out and complete quests on an open map filled with towns, castles, forests, mountains, and deserts. The overhead gameplay unfolds in the following manner: the player talks to someone who will give the player a quest, then the player will travel to that destination to talk to another person and/or retrieve an object/information to return it to discover the next quest. Issues arise in the combat system and the interface. Combat is very rudimentary, consisting of a simple melee attack and avoidance of a handful of different enemy types in four basic directions. Gold, potions, and food are sometimes dropped by certain enemies for the player to pick up. The gold is mostly used to purchase food to replenish hunger (which acts like a secondary health meter) or to stay at one of the several inns to get a password to save and continue the game. A computer game-influenced menu system makes picking up these items an unnecessary complication during gameplay, as is the speaking to various people to unlock clues and the next quest. The game's computer origins hamper the experience top to bottom, including the simplistic graphics and sounds. The experience comes across as a "beginner's guide to adventure and RPG games," which is unfortunate, since on the PC it was probably more substantial, but on the NES it isn't very interesting.

Reflections: The former PC game's influence can be strongly seen throughout, but very noticeably in the story, which is somewhat complex for an NES game. It involves a missing king (who may or may not be dead) and a kingdom that is barely being held together by various barons and nobles, with some political intrigue thrown in. The NES manual for *Times of Lore* is one of the wordiest ones I've seen, but it's nice to have a game where some actual thought went into the background story besides "evil guy kidnaps helpless girl." – PC

Tiny Toon Adventures

Genre: Platformer
Release Date: Dec. 1991
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Konami
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

In this side-scrolling platformer based on the animated show, players control Buster Bunny along with a player-selected, switchable sidekick with a unique power. The characters are swiched via the "toon-a-round" item picked up in the stages. Plucky Duck can swim faster and can float his jumps by flapping, Furrball can climb certain surfaces with his claws and perform a twist jump to increase height/distance, and Dizzy Devil has a powerful spin attack. The special abilities are based upon a power meter, which will decrease a bit upon use, but will gradually replenish over time. Other items include carrots that can be turned in for extra lives, a stopwatch to freeze the enemies and stop time, and a heart to give the player a second chance hit. The game is standard, with running and jumping on cartoon enemies to defeat them, but it's the attention to detail that really makes this one of Konami's best, unsung titles. Level design is fun and cartoony, taking players through Wackyland and Monty's Mansion, while maintaining a near perfect difficulty curve. Controls are tight and responsive, and bouncing off of foes after jumping on them has a great feel. Almost every character from the television show appears as various types of support or as enemies and bosses; it's no surprise when players run into Elmira as one of the first boss battles. The summation of the experience is that it really feels as if you are running through the cartoon. Fans of the show get a great-themed title which is quite the feat in and of itself, but even those who could care less about these pint-sized toons have a game worthy of playing.

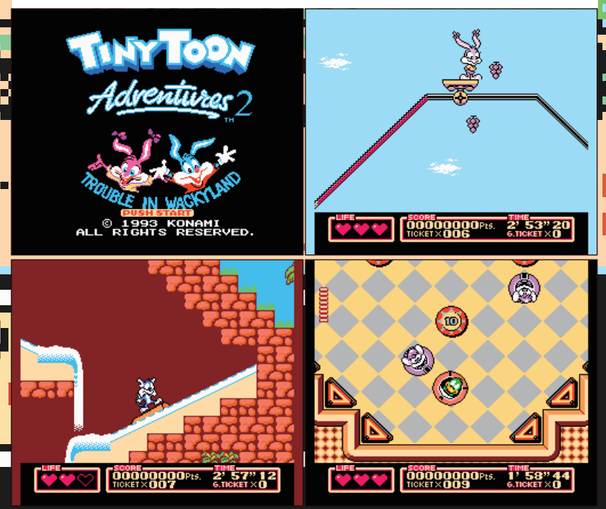
Reflections: I am actually not a huge fan of this show, but from the first time I played the game I wanted to own it. It's very appealing to me, like a bag of video game candy. The majority of the 8- and 16-bit games in the *Tiny Toon* series were remarkably well done. If only superhero fans could have been so lucky. – IF

Tiny Toon Adventures 2: Trouble in Wackyland

Genre: Action
Release Date: Apr. 1993
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Konami
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

The Tiny Toons are back for another adventure at the Wackyland theme park. The goal is to earn enough tickets to enter the funhouse where their biggest fan awaits. There are two ways to do so: amass 50 standard tickets or four golden ones. The basic flow of the game starts at a map of the theme park. Players begin with 10 tickets and can exchange points earned from braving the various rides for more at the ticket booth. Completing one of the four rides in its entirety earns the player one of the four golden tickets. Each ride costs a varying number of tickets to attempt, acting in a way as lives. There's a rollercoaster ride where players will take control of Babs as she must duck, jump, and avoid all manner of obstacles on the side-scrolling track as she stands on a cart. It's the most difficult of the rides and, as with them all, has no checkpoints, resulting in swift frustration. A log flume ride has Furrball riding a log through up and downhill rapids while jumping to avoid fish and other creatures. It takes a wild detour when players reach the log reloading area, which has Furrball riding a lift while avoiding dangerous spiked posts to the end. Hamton gets duty on a train car ride, which is the easiest as he must work his way along the tops of the train while defeating mice with a belly bounce and staying one step ahead of the signs that can block him, as well as the occasionally decoupling car. Lastly, Plucky tackles the bumper cars, where he must beat three levels of overhead action in which he must send the enemy cars into pits on changing courses. Plucky can move slowly with the D-pad and can tap the charge button to move faster. Holding charge will unleash a powerful bump, but lining up hits is massively annoying, especially when half the levels consist of pinball bumpers. Once all of the golden tickets have been collected, players will join Buster in the funhouse: a side-scrolling maze with many doors and paths to get lost in. Segments with rideable swinging platforms add to the challenge, and it all caps off with a boss fight from the toons' "admirer." The game has wonderful graphics, decent sound, and okay controls. But the grinding for tickets can be frustrating, as players can die at the trickiest final segments only to have to start fresh each time. The cute concept may carry it for some, but it will likely grow old for most players rather quickly.

Reflections: I was obsessed with *Tiny Toon Adventures* for the NES when I was a kid. It was such a colorful and playful platformer. When I got wind of a sequel coming out, I think I asked for it for a birthday and Christmas in a row without getting it. Now that I've finally messed with it, I'm sure glad I didn't. The grinding for tickets and thrown-together gameplay I think would have disappointed any fan holding expectations for something as awesome as the first. – IF



Tiny Toon Adventures: Cartoon Workshop

Genre: Creativity
Release Date: Dec. 1992
Developer: Novotrade International
Publisher: Konami
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★

Create side-scrolling animated shorts with Tiny Toon characters in this ambitious but misguided cartoon maker. The top third of the screen is where most of the actions are performed and the end result is played out below. A choice of six main characters are available, from Babs and Buster Bunny (no relation), to Little Beeper, Furrball, Calamity Coyote, and Plucky. Sadly, the game completely omits other mainstays such as Montana Max and Hamton Pig, and only two characters can be used for each animation. Each character has selectable poses and movements which are easy to implement thanks to the drag and drop, point-and-click interface, but this is quite clunky to use with the NES controller. Multiple backdrop scenarios can be selected, including the Tooniversity, desert, snow scenes, rooftops, or just plain-colored backdrops. There are stock sound effects to use and musical tracks to overlay to add a little more depth. Once the characters are set, they can be given stock dialogue captions, but sadly these cannot be implemented manually. Once the clip is complete (up to five minutes), it can then be saved by recording it to a VCR as there is no battery save feature. The director can make various scenarios between characters, for example recreating a classic rendition of a Road Runner chase sequence between Calamity and Little Beeper. Placing the two characters on the timeline, then making them chase each other, ending with the inevitable failure such as Calamity falling down a pit, blowing himself up, or hitting a cactus, while adding an appropriate speech bubble such as him declaring "Why me?" in defeat. Or having Babs declare her love for Buster and giving him a Valentine's card, only for him to retreat at speed on roller skates. The potential skits are basic in nature – it simply boils down to the director's imagination and the cart limitation. Despite its obvious flaws, there is some fun to be had from seeing a creation come to life, but it is too basic to warrant any extended play. It looks great as the characters pop with color, but this sort of game belongs on a computer where limitations would be less of an issue.

Reflections: Obviously the NES has limitations when it comes to running something like this, as it shows in the severe lack of characters and backdrops. There are quite a lot of animations to micromanage, but the interaction between characters is just poor. Not allowing the player to write their own dialogue is an absolute sin (though I'm sure Nintendo probably didn't want kids having characters swearing at one another) and no battery save is a massive sticking point. Stick to *Mario Paint* on SNES or the *Shoot'Em-Up Construction Kit* on the C64 for more rewarding animation fun. – JE

To the Earth

Genre: Shooting Gallery
Release Date: Nov. 1989
Developer: Cirque Verte
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1
Special Features: Zapper (required)
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

Traveling in a spaceship from Neptune, players must battle aliens to get back to the Earth and deliver an antibacterial agent to save it in this first-person shooter. Using the Zapper, players shoot at enemy spaceships that zip by both horizontally and incoming towards the player (and past them). They move extremely fast, making shots at them somewhat difficult. The scaling effects are beautifully done here. However, the amount of fast-moving objects on screen is daunting, especially when they fire missiles at you, which must be shot as to not take damage to the shields. The shields also deplete for every shot fired, but by hitting an object they will be restored. Unfortunately, as action heats up, more and more shots will be required (and missed), draining the shield faster than you would like. Every once in a while, a bomb power-up will appear on the corner of the screen to be shot to destroy all enemies, or a friendly ship will drop off an item to restore shields (but don't shoot the ship!). Boss battles are also fast and furious goings, but the aforementioned depleting of shields for every shot quickly makes this an unforgiving experience, since there is little ramp up on the difficulty before being thrown into the deep end. Unfortunately, the shortcomings of the single-fire Zapper controller cannot sufficiently keep up.

Reflections: If the controller met the specifications needed here, this could have been something magical, and easily the best light gun game on the NES. Everything looks so good and the speed of moving ships is intense. However, I think Cirque Verte overestimated how handy the Zapper is in the hands of the average player. The Zapper only records hits upon a full press of the trigger, so unless your aim is still at that exact moment the trigger is pulled, the shot will be off, making quick movement and rapid-fire not ideal for the controller. If Nintendo had released a machine gun style accessory (or if the enemies were slowed down in the game even 25 percent), this is a game that would be fondly remembered and played even today, instead of being mostly ignored as one of least heralded of the light gun titles, save for perhaps *Chiller* and *Baby Boomer*. – PC

Toki

Genre: Run and Gun Shooter
Release Date: Dec. 1991
Developer: TAD
Ported by: Daiei Seisakusho
Publisher: Taito
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★★

Toki must rescue his fair lady from the very same sorcerer that turned him into a spitting ape in this fun and challenging run and gun shooter/platformer. Players proceed through the jungle, ice, and, cave levels fighting all manner of angry primates, deities, plants, insects, and devils while grabbing power-ups like shoes for jumping higher, a helmet for protection, and more powerful projectile spit (spread-fire, larger balls, flamethrower, and charge-up meter). Multi-directional shooting and tight controls give the player the means for success while still presenting a steady difficulty curve. The graphics are cute and the game is occasionally downright weird, such as when a certain boss burps the actual letters B, U, R, and P at our hero. The challenge is high, but fortunately the player has a health meter via hearts to help. In between levels, players are shown a little map and a bit of text to further the story and explain what's on the horizon, which is a nice touch for a game of this type. The amount of unfortunate flicker in the sprites shows that the game was a bit overambitious graphically, but it's pretty easy to forgive when apes in football helmets are on screen.

Reflections: The NES version of this stands as the most approachable. The arcade version features one-hit kills, while the Genesis port is almost an entirely different game. Toki moves faster in the NES version, easily the biggest improvement. It's not too common for an arcade port on inferior hardware to come out better than its source, but *Toki* does just that. – IF

Arguably the best primate-spitting shooter ever programmed. There's a bizarre opening sequence that shows a giant blue hand scoop up girlfriend Miho and carry her off screen before Vookimedlo transforms Toki into the monkey. According to the manual, Toki called upon the "Spirit of the Jungle" to help him out, which responded by giving him the ability to shoot fireballs ("it feels like gargling"). Hey Spirit, why don't you use some of your magic mojo to turn Toki back to normal why you're at it? – PC

Tom & Jerry

Genre: Platformer
Release Date: Dec. 1991
Developer: Software Creations
Publisher: Hi Tech Expressions
Players: 1
Special Features:N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

Based on the iconic cartoon, players take control of Jerry the mouse who must save his nephew Tuffy from his feline adversary Tom. Gameplay consists of platforming and level traversing both vertically and horizontally via standard jumping and climbing up and down objects like pipes and ladders. Jerry can fight off roaches, flies, toy soldiers, spiders, etc., by throwing marbles by default or by collecting and using other weapons like a meat cleaver or hammer. Controls are fine but there is some questionable enemy placement in spots. Jerry has hearts for health and can collect cheese to replenish them. The graphics and animation do the cartoon license justice, with nicely drawn sprites and large background objects. However, the title falters somewhat due to the questionable level design, which is not linear and is often unclear in defining a discernible path of action, resulting in backtracking and frustration. There is still a decent amount to admire here, like the boss battles against Tom, and the energetic (if sometimes grating) music tracks.

Reflections: My main exposure to this game as a child was via a pirated PC copy on a 3.5-inch floppy disk that my friend copied for me. I remember playing with the keyboard and listening to the sounds of the game via the squeaky PC speaker tones (you old school computer gamers know what I'm talking 'bout!). Ironically, the NES game music is just as annoying to my ears.

Tom & Jerry was a classic cartoon, which I did enjoy, but I used to sometimes wish that Tom would beat the crap out of that dirty mouse. Why does he get away with breaking into the house, living there without paying rent, and stealing all the food while leaving behind who knows what type of diseases?! Get out, get a job, and get your own food... frickin' rodent freeloader. – PC

Tombs & Treasure

Genre: RPG, Adventure
Release Date: June 1991
Developer: Nihon Falcom
Ported by: Compile
Publisher: Infocom
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★

Choose your own name for two adventurers (Moe and Mabel in this case) and travel to Chichen Itza searching for missing Professor Imes, who vanished in search of the fabled Sun Key. Together with their guide José, they must explore nine varied areas in order to unravel the Mayan mystery. The game plays as a first-person adventure (which is attractively detailed) with a top-down traditional RPG world map to traverse between tombs. Controls are a standard interface of arrow key directions and also more specific action icons such as fight, wash, use and wait. Fighting the occasional but detailed monster is sadly simplistic – equip the sword and spam the fight icon before one of you dies. The scripted monsters appear at pivotal moments instead of randomly, so there is never the surprise of battle. Leveling up is done automatically, which doesn't give you anything new – it just means you can last longer walloping baddies until one of you croaks. The player can attach jewels to the sword to add status ailments for attacks but it is underwhelming. Each adventurer has different attributes which can be used to push on: Moe is the staple all-rounder, Mabel can use musical instruments (needed for puzzles), and José can push secret walls with his strength. The overworld is completely void of anything and is simply the space between the next area. Accidentally go into the wrong tomb too early and you will be punished by an enemy that is too strong. By collecting a plethora of MacGuffins, masks, and keys, the player can traverse the tombs and try to solve the ever gray matter-prodding puzzles. There are fun spots that are ultimately let down by the mind-bogglingly obscure puzzling, lack of enemy interaction, and sparse overworld.

Reflections: I enjoy the occasional dungeon-crawler filled with mild peril, nasty ghastlies, and treasure. But alas, this seemed an incredibly watered-down affair. The joy of playing these games is to go all out hitting stuff with sticks, get gold, return to town, and come back with bigger sticks to hit bigger things, which simply isn't here. At least the enemies are well-designed, but there are not enough of them! You expect *Legend Of Zelda*-style exploration, but apart from getting lost, all you can do is jog on to (hopefully) the right tomb. The puzzles are excruciatingly obscure. How are you supposed to know to wash the golden mirror in the Well of Paradise so that it can show you where some panpipes are? That's the equivalent of me putting my toothbrush down the toilet to show me that there's a ham sandwich in the fridge. I dread to think how bland the original game is (*Taiyou no Shinden Asteka II*), as *Tombs & Treasures* was the ported English version with added role-play elements and story! One to avoid. – JE

Toobin'

Genre: Action
Release Date: 1989
Developer: Atari Games
Ported by: Tengen
Publisher: Tengen
Players: 1–2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Common
★★★

Floating down rivers in an inner tube is the name of the game in this quirky action title ported from the arcade. In an overhead perspective, the shirtless player (in sunglasses) will maneuver downwards to reach a whirlpool to move onto the next stage. Many obstacles/hazards will get in the way, such as animals, branches/logs in the water, and characters on both river banks who will try to stop you, like cavemen or jumping penguins. Players are armed with a limited amount of cans, which can be collected in the river (maximum of nine). These are thrown at a 45-degree angle forward left/right with B/A, and can be used to take out small obstacles in the way, and some enemies like crocodiles (some are unaffected). For points, players can pass through gates along the river and pick up treasure. Other items to look out for include a beach ball (increases speed), patch (extra life), and letters to spell "Toobin" (bonus points and extra lives). There's a nice variety of river stages and accompanying enemies, such as the Rio Grande, Nile, Amazon, Yukon, beach, and even fantastical ones like a prehistoric river with dinosaurs, a river on Mars, a nightmare river, and the river Styx. Some groovy tunes accentuate the river-floating mood. After a while though, even the mellow tubing experience needs a change of pace, but there's little here that provides it, save for the different scenery. The lack of a simultaneous two-player mode is disappointing as well. It's a nice diversion, but not nearly as deep as the rivers you float down.

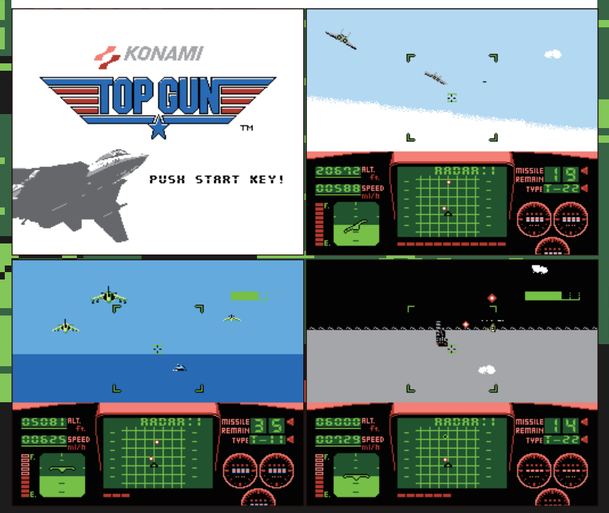
Reflections: *Toobin'* is a great example of game where the control scheme enhances the enjoyment. In the arcade, there were four buttons to control movement, one for each arm to paddle backwards and forwards. This layout had a learning curve but allowed the player to rotate in the tube, paddle backwards while firing forward, and perform other nifty moves. It was more difficult to move, as players had to turn in order to move in another direction, but it was a lot more fun since it echoed actually being in an inner tube. Touches like trying to maneuver through gates backwards or carefully using each arm to paddle slowly through tough spots are absolutely gone from the NES version, much to its detriment. Dare I say, it's that rare game that's too easy to control, eliminating much of the charm. – PC

Top Gun

Genre: Shooter, Simulation
Release Date: Nov. 1987
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Konami
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★⋆

Based on the film, players take off and battle in an F-14 Tomcat over four missions in this combat shooter. Action takes place in a first-person view in a cockpit, with a HUD (heads up display) showing information such as radar, fuel, damage, and missiles remaining. Before the mission begins, players may select one of three missile types, each a different quantity and range. After takeoff, gameplay takes place on rails, with the player having limited ability to move vertically and horizontally. Air and ground targets will show up on radar and then in visual contact, with air targets approaching from the front and rear. Players will have a few seconds to shoot them with unlimited cannon ammo via A, or by locking on and firing missiles with B. Players will have to avoid incoming cannon fire, which will destroy the player after a few hits, and missiles fired from the front that the player will have a few seconds to either destroy or avoid, or else instant death will occur. Missiles may also be fired from behind at the player, which will result in a mini-game on the HUD where players will have to maneuver out of the lock-on of the enemy within several seconds. Gameplay is fast and challenging, although players can avoid most enemies if they really wish to. At the end of levels two through four, players will face a difficult, stationary ground target end boss which will require lots of wild maneuvering and firing to defeat. The end of each level requires the player to engage in a somewhat challenging landing sequence back onto a carrier, where players will have to closely follow onscreen instructions for direction, speed, and altitude, in order to successfully land. Failing to do so will cost a life. Players will also lose a life if they fail to successfully refuel in missions two through four, but that is far easier to do. This is definitely not a simulation, but more a fast arcade-style experience that may frustrate, but also provide some dogfighting thrills.

Reflections: *Top Gun* and air combat were huge in the mid-to-late '80s. My father loved studying combat jets, and loved *Top Gun*, so he purchased this game (I didn't ask for it). I probably ended up playing it more than he did, though. The game today gets a bad rap due to the challenging landing sequences. I scratch my head at this, because us kids could land the plane pretty well in our day with some practice. I think some gamers today just aren't as qualified to speak about playing older games due to their lack of experience with ones that require a bit more technique than modern games do. – PC

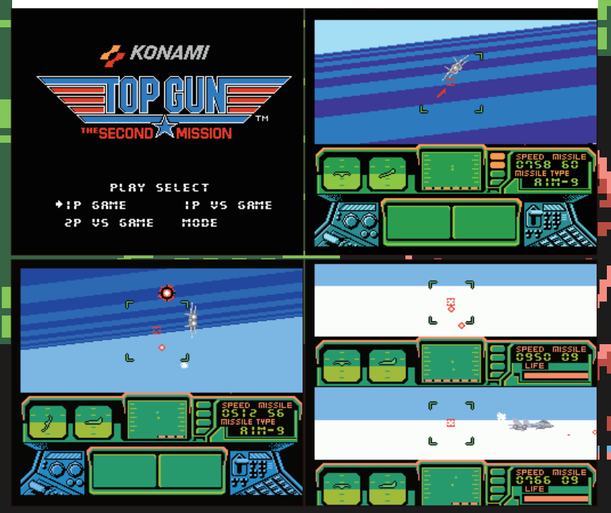


Top Gun: The Second Mission

Genre: Shooter, Simulation
Release Date: Jan. 1990
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Konami
Players: 1–2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⋆

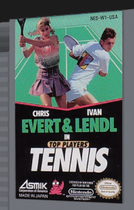
Once again, players pilot an F-14 Tomcat fighter jet in three different combat missions to take out enemy bogies. Players choose their missile loadout, choosing whether they prefer quantity or range of fire, and then take off from their carrier. Gameplay takes place from a first-person cockpit view, with a HUD (heads up display) showing information such as missiles remaining, speed, damage, alert lamps, radar screen, and the level and orientation of the plane. This time around, players do not fly in a straight line, but rather have the ability to turn and fly in 360 degrees, and can even perform rolls by tapping the D-pad twice left or right. Air targets likewise do not fly in a set pattern, but can pass the player, turn around, and engage with cannons or missiles from every direction. Players can fire back with the B button, holding it to fire cannons, or tapping it twice to fire a missile when locked on within the target area. Players can fly faster by speeding up with the A button, which is useful in getting away from enemies and incoming fire. Destroying incoming missiles is more difficult than the first game, so avoidance is usually a safer bet. Releasing A will slow the plane, which enables locking onto targets and destroying them easier. These elements make the gameplay experience more of a simulation than an arcade-style shooter. Dogfighting is quite engaging, since players have to actively engage their targets who will seek them out as well. In particular, the one-on-one battles against the miniboss jets are very tough. After destroying a certain number of targets, players will face a large enemy end boss, and then have to land the plane on a carrier in a fairly simple mini-game sequence. There's a lot to admire here, as the combination of simulation elements mixed with arcade shooter action works for the most part, although the challenge may be too much for some. Options include the ability to turn music on/off and even reverse the vertical controls to replicate a joystick. There's even a split-screen battle mode for one or two players. Recommended for air combat fans, but casual players might want to bail out.

Reflections: It's nice to see Konami expand the experience of the original game and actively challenge players, while also streamlining the landing sequences. While the first game has a "pick up and play" feel to it, this sequel definitely does not. Do that and you'll have Maverick saying "You stink," much in the same way he told Slider in the film. – PC



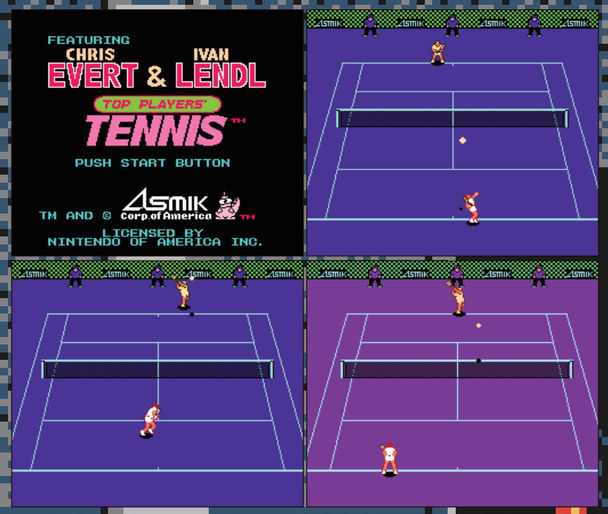
Top Players' Tennis (Chris Evert & Ivan Lendl in)

Four Players' Tennis *(PAL)*
Genre: Sports
Release Date: Jan. 1990
Developer: Home Data
Publisher: Asmik
Players: 1-4 (simultaneous)
Special Features: NES Four Score / Satellite compatible, Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⋆



This title features top tennis players Ivan Lendl and Chris Evert. Players may select up to four players for an exhibition singles match or doubles match. A singles career mode is available as well, with the player selecting either Evert, Lendl, or a boy or girl. If boy or girl is selected, players can customize the name as well as eight skill attributes (with more skill points awarded upon winning matches). Players start off in the Asmik tournament, and if successful can then compete in the four major Grand Slam tournaments: Wimbledon, French Open, U.S. Open, and Australian Open. On the court, players can serve, volley, forehand, backhand, lob, overhead smash, and even jump for the ball via A + B. Controls are a little deep and will take getting used to. Holding the A button will determine how powerful/long the shot is. Like real tennis, hitting the ball to either side of the court depends not only on how far ahead/behind the ball is to your player but how close the ball is to their body. There is also the ability to put different topspin, slice, and side spin on the ball via the D-pad. Players can nicely be on the move while going for a shot, which can result in some nice volleys and interesting action back and forth. If this somewhat complex control scheme was not enough, there are also five different "Miracle Shots" that can be built up and performed when serving or returning the serve; these supernatural shots have a much higher chance of success. Presentation is nice, with decent graphics and very good voice samples. There are a lot of options, and the limited career mode is nice. However, the game is definitely not easy to learn, but those that stick with it and learn the somewhat realistic control scheme will be rewarded with a solid tennis simulator.

Reflections: It's unfortunate that the only four-player NES tennis game released in the U.S. would also be the most complicated to control. Not that you'd be likely to find a party where people wanted to play doubles *Top Players' Tennis*, but stranger things have happened. I'm sure there was at least one upper-class NES gathering that was disappointed somewhere. "Muffy, I can't quite seem to get the hang of it! Pass the caviar and foie gras." – PC



Total Recall

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Aug. 1990
Developer: Interplay Productions
Publisher: Acclaim Entertainment
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

Douglas Quaid has lost bits of his memory and can't figure out why everyone, even his supposed wife, is attacking him. His platforming exploits take him through a series of environments, from the subways of Earth to the mines of Mars. The goal of each stage is generally to get to the exit, although there are additional ones such as collecting an item or defeating a boss. At his disposal in defeating the hordes of foes are his fists; later on, he obtains guns and a laser. When the game is paused, Quaid can switch between his items, shown on the right of the status bar. On the left is his health meter (above the hearts that indicate his extra lives). A death starts him at the beginning of a stage, and when all his lives are lost, it's game over. By paying attention to the fabulous cutscenes, however, there is a way to continue at Mars once it has been reached. This game does a surprisingly good job of telling a form of the titular movie's story, but relentless respawns and attacking enemies make progressing less fun and more of a chore. Each level has its own look (there's even a top-down driving stage in the Transit Hub), and the enemies within are fitting, such as the guards and attack dogs in the subway or the drones in the spaceport at Mars. It's a game that has all the makings of being great, but fighting in the stages can be too much of a challenge.

Reflections: Okay, who put jamming music into the title screen? (Veteran video game composers George "The Fat Man" Sanger and David Warhol, that's who!) Honestly, it's one of my favorite parts of the game. I also rather enjoyed the mine stage because the responsive controls made it fun to jump from platform to platform, and the enemies died in one hit and didn't respawn. *That* is what I wanted in all the other levels! While it was nice having a break with a driving section, it was completely unforgiving, using whatever health Quaid came into the stage with and dealing strong damage from rocket-launching units as well as collisions. Issues aside, I still consider this game a highlight on a console notorious for bad movie-licensed games, but it had so much more potential! – KY

Totally Rad

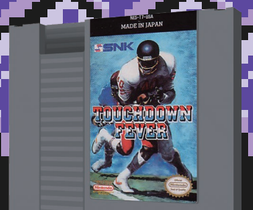
Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Mar. 1991
Developer: Aicom
Publisher: Jaleco
Players: 1
Special Features:N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

Jake, a "surfer dude" apprentice magician, must rescue his girlfriend Allison from the underground evil Edogy. Jake attacks his enemies with a weak magical projectile blast that can be powered up by holding the B button. Jake also is given a limited amount of magical capacity for each stage that allows the player to cast one of a dozen spells, including transforming into either an eagle, lion, or fish (with different abilities), as well as attack and health-restoring spells. These spells will help the player handle different situations/enemies encountered, and are essential for success since it is the only way to replenish the player's health bar. Gameplay is fairly smooth in traversing the levels vertically and horizontally, however the player must be overly careful when attacking enemies, making the experiences on the stages abruptly "stop and go" in nature. The challenge is a little unbalanced due to the limited number of times Jake can get hit, combined with the limited magic and lack of health items, making the game a slow pain to trudge through. Presentation is mixed, as the backgrounds of the levels look pretty nice and are varied, but the look and variety of the enemies is limited and similar throughout the stages, with the only highlights being the very large enemy bosses. Some nice cutscenes tell the story, and decent music rounds out a solid and strangely themed effort.

Reflections: Jake is a southern California skateboarding "dude" with surfer lingo that somehow is a magician. Whaaaa?! I know there was this weird fascination with southern Californian teenagers in the late '80s and early '90s, but this was pandering to make the main character act in that mold, even then. Along that path, the manual to this game is insufferable. It's absolute drivel that's written with *Bill & Ted* styled lingo featuring dozens of uses of "cool" words such as "righteous," "dude," "gnarly," and "bogus." The story of the game in the manual is FOUR PAGES LONG and you couldn't pay me to read all of it, since it's written in such an idiotic and over-the-top fashion. If that's not enough, the writer thought it would be a great idea to insert picture "jokes" in the manual that aren't related to the game at all. One such picture is of a young blonde woman who is called a "very righteous babe" by the author. It's embarrassing, and it makes me feel queasy knowing that somewhere out there a real person was made a part of an unfortunate and unfunny joke by some hack NES manual writer. – PC

Touchdown Fever

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Feb. 1991
Developer: SNK
Publisher: SNK
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features:N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★⋆



This football game consists of single game and tournament modes. Players select a team (with no real difference besides uniform color), and it's time for kickoff! On the field (viewed vertically overhead) control is very smooth, and the small, cartoonish players are easy to maneuver. The seams start to show when selecting a play, of which there are only four on offense. The defense gets no choice at all. After hiking the ball, the quarterback has one of two options for handing off or passing via assigned players marked with a blinking "B" and "A." Pressing either button will attempt the pass/hand-off to the direction of that player at that specific moment, at which time the player will take control of the receiver to try and complete the pass. It's not very intuitive and doesn't represent true football at all, especially on the hand-off attempts, which have to be very precise or else the quarterback will miss entirely. Even the CPU opponent will sometimes fail to execute these plays. Other major gameplay flaws include the extremely large, proportionately false field, which makes advancing the ball difficult. There is also the lack of first down markers and the inability to select different defensive plays. While there are a couple of nice gameplay elements not seen in other football titles, such as two-point conversion attempts, laterals, and the ability for two human players to play on the same team, it's clear that the development team only had a cursory knowledge of football when creating this flawed title.

Reflections: While on the surface *Touchdown Fever* may look like a more advanced version of *10-Yard Fight*, in reality it does a far less admirable job of simulating American football. The field feels like it's 500 yards long, and scoring more than one touchdown in a game was a serious challenge for me. It's a shame and a surprise, since SNK knocked it out of the park with all their baseball games (I just realized that awful pun now). If more care and perhaps an advisor were involved, I'm sure SNK could have made a quality sports game here too. However, *Touchdown Fever* mars what otherwise was a very good run of SNK sports titles. – PC

Town & Country Surf Designs: Wood & Water Rage

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Feb. 1988
Developer: Atlus, Sanritsu Denki
Publisher: LJN
Players: 1-2
Special Features:N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

Based upon characters from the Hawaiian surfboard company, players head to the beach for skating and surfing action. In the surfing game, players take control of Thrilla Gorilla or Kool Kat. The objective of each level is to travel from left to right and reach the beach area without falling off the board, which will result in the loss of life symbols. Controlling the board is difficult, especially when trying to avoid objects in the water and birds who will put you in the water. Trying to stay afloat and do simple tricks is the key to building up enough points and life symbols to gradually make it across to the beach. The skateboarding game is the real highlight. Here, players take control of Cool Joe or Tiki Man and must skate around and over objects while performing jumping tricks. Besides preventing the life symbols from being lost and ending the game, the player must watch the time limit on each stage. However, if the player performs well and scores enough points without taking a spill, the clock will freeze. Players can really get into a flow in the skateboarding mode, as the game is fast-moving and pretty challenging without being unfair. Graphically, the game is impressive and really conveys a distinct personality, and the music, while limited in the number of tracks, is punchy and well done. There's not a whole lot here, but it's good for a sunny jaunt, especially the two-player mode.

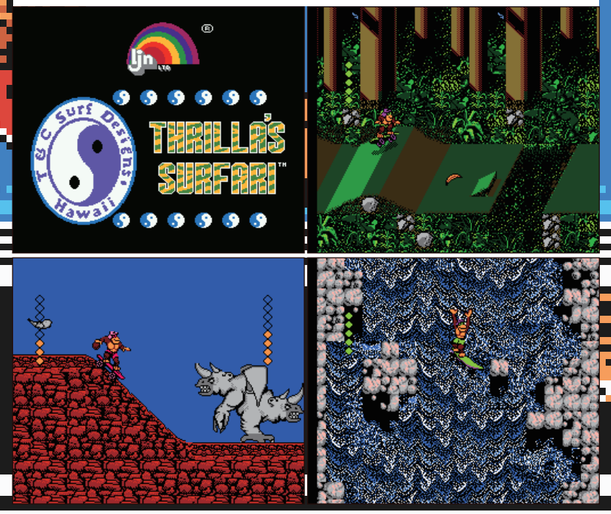
Reflections: I played a lot of *T&C* as a kid with my friend Kevin. While we always gravitated towards the skateboarding part of the game, we would stick our toes in the water (so to speak) every once in a while with the surfing mode. And then we'd get destroyed. Don't get me wrong, it's fun to play, but it was rare if we ever passed the second or third level of surfing versus the skateboarding game, where I could get very far, even to the point that the last level would loop. Years later, I would use the surfing game to challenge players live at conventions for my "Play the Punk Challenge," where individuals would win a free NES game or other prizes if they could defeat me. Even with years of experience, I still would lose most of the time when this challenge came up, even against players who had never played *T&C* before. I'm not sure if that says more about the game's subpar design or my poor surfing skills. – PC

Town & Country II: Thrilla's Surfari

Genre: Action
Release Date: Mar. 1992
Developer: Sculptured Software
Publisher: LJN
Players: 1
Special Features:N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★

Thrilla Gorilla's girlfriend Barbi Bikini has been kidnapped by a witch doctor, and it's up to the surfer/skater to rescue her. Spread across several worlds with multiple stages, gameplay consists mainly of Thrilla surfing or skating through various environments (mostly jungle), trying to avoid enemies like spiders, elephants, frogs, snakes, spear-wielding humans, eels, and more (some can be jumped on and destroyed). There are also many hazards/obstacles to avoid, like pits, stones, and fallen tree logs. Gameplay usually ping-pongs left-to-right while gradually descending, with Thrilla traveling down steep slopes, up/down hills, and taking advantage of speed and ramps to make huge jumps (sometimes done in style). The sense of speed and constant danger is exhilarating, with Thrilla's moving and jumping mechanics buoyed by fine controls. Thrilla can pick up bananas to increase his health bar, but some enemies will mean instant death if they are run into, and the same goes for the aforementioned stones/logs in the way. Limited invincibility power-ups humorously have Thrilla travel upside down via hand-stand on his board. Picking up red balls during the levels means a chance at extra lives during a bonus shell game. There are a few underwater levels where Thrilla rides a shark while firing banana torpedoes; these are not as fun and more difficult due to sea creatures inflicting massive damage with little room to move around while they track you. The graphics and animation are all well done, including the huge sprites you'll see during the boss battles. Cute cutscenes move the story along and feature the other characters from the first *T&C* game. It's not perfect, and can be very overly challenging at spots, but the various gameplay modes, great look, sense of humor, and charm all contribute to a bodacious experience.

Reflections: A vast departure from the original game, the sequel here opted for a more traditional action game, and it somehow worked out for the better. This game was released at the height of the cartoon-character licensing for Hawaiian-based Town & Country Surf Designs, and soon afterwards all their characters designed by Steve Nazar disappeared from use/promotion. It's unfortunate, and I still miss Kool Kat, the coolest cat to ever surf in a tuxedo. – PC



Toxic Crusaders

Genre: Beat 'em Up, Action
Release Date: Apr. 1992
Developer: TOSE
Publisher: Bandai
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

In Tromaville, the mutated hero Toxie must save his friends from the evil Dr. Killemoff. Toxie battles through beat 'em up levels with his trusty mop, and then his fist when he is damaged by enemies and loses it. The action here is simple as the player takes out enemies with a single attack, a weak one with the B button and (strangely) the same but stronger attack with SELECT. It's tough to take out even the common enemies without taking damage, especially when they pounce on to the screen suddenly. Barrels throughout levels can be destroyed for burgers for more health. Power-ups are available to restore Toxie's mop and power up the mop up to twice for projectile attacks. Unfortunately, unless the mop is powered up and retained, plodding through the limited types of enemies (of which 90 percent are the same two) is neither engaging nor challenging. The presentation is refined with some nice cutscenes and graphics, and there is even a shooter stage and one on a skateboard that are decent. However, attacking enemies and bosses without taking damage regularly and losing your means of effective attack slows the game's fun factor down to a sludgy faucet drip.

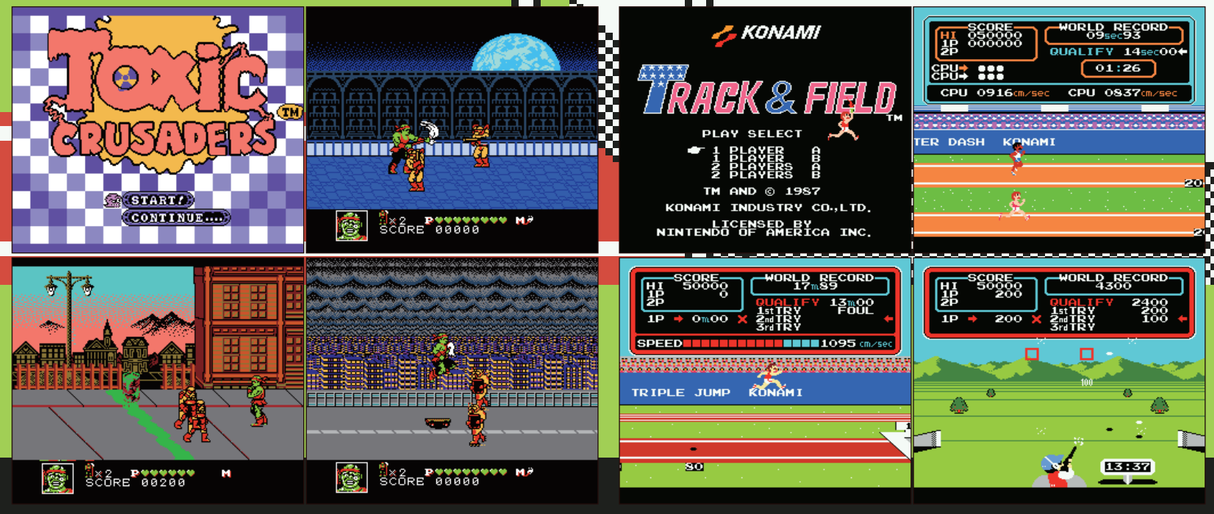
Reflections: I'm still not sure how this is an actual licensed property, let alone an NES Game. *Toxic Crusaders* was a cartoon for kids based upon the ultra-violent and adult Troma film *The Toxic Avenger*. It's puzzling that Lloyd Kaufman concocted a deal for an animated version with a weird pro-environment message, but there you go. There was also a toy line produced by Playmates (who also did the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles figures). The commercials featured the strange but memorable tagline, "They're gross, but they still get girls!" Sadly, that never was true for my experiences with the fairer sex. – PC

Track & Field

Track & Field in Barcelona *(PAL)*
Genre: Sports
Release Date: Apr. 1987
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Konami
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★⋆

Compete in several Olympics events in this landmark sports title. One or two players must qualify in several events that are really mini-games: 100-meter Dash, 110-meter Hurdles, Javelin Throw, Triple Jump, Archery, Skeet Shooting, Long Jump, and High Jump. The Dash and Hurdles are timed events, but the others require a minimum score (Archery and Skeet Shooting) or a minimum height or distance achieved (Javelin Throw, Triple Jump, Long Jump, High Jump). Most events require mashing the A button continually to build up speed to run and then pressing UP at the appropriate time to jump (Triple Jump and Long Jump) or throw (Javelin), selecting the angle of the throw/jump to maximize potential distance. Archery and Skeet Shooting are a nice change of pace, and are more games of timing, with Archery having to account for wind when shooting moving targets, and Skeet Shooting requiring a button press when the skeets enter the aiming boxes on screen. High Jump is the most challenging event by far, requiring changing the angle of the jump a few times in order to clear the bar. If players qualify for all the events, they will repeat with tougher requirements. Otherwise, players can practice in one event at a time. It's shallow but very fun, with the downside being the uneven difficulty in a couple of events (High Jump and Skeet Shooting stand out). The two-player mode, cute graphics, and hidden easter eggs thrown in make this an enjoyable title, even in small bursts.

Reflections: Oh, the simple, goofy fun of *Track & Field*. Ever since its inception in the arcade, the allure of mindlessly slapping buttons as fast as you can has drawn in countless players. The NES port actually combines most of the events from the arcade game and its sequel *Hyper Sports*. Konami left out freestyle swimming, hammer throw, gymnastics vault, and weightlifting. If you get a chance, check out the weightlifting game. It's extremely bizarre with the character movements as they struggle to get the barbell up. So yeah, *Track & Field* – still forever the defining Olympics game experience, complete with short-shorts and a great mustache. – PC

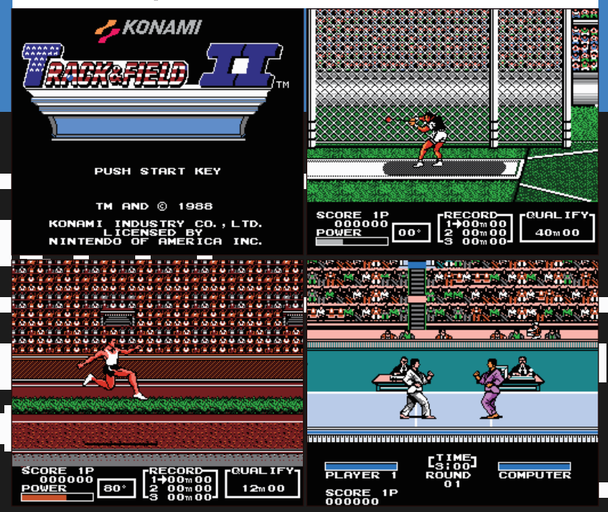


Track & Field II

Genre: Sports
Release Date: June 1989
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Konami
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save, Zapper (optional)
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★★½

This Summer Olympics style game consists of 12 different events, and qualifying for the three events on each day continues the game. The 12 events are very different from one another and are a great sampling of different sports: Fencing, Triple Jump, Freestyle Swimming, High Dive, Clay Pigeon Shooting, Hammer Throw, Taekwondo, Pole Vault, Canoeing, Archery, Hurdles, and Horizontal Bar. Players choose one of 10 nations to represent. Each event has its own control scheme. Some events, such as Hurdles and Freestyle Swimming, require button mashing in order to build speed and/or power to be successful, while others such as Canoeing, Hammer Throw, and Fencing require more technical prowess due to more complicated controls. Some events like Triple Jump, Pole Vault, and Horizontal Bar, however, are very difficult without the aid of a turbo button function. If all 12 events are qualified for the first time around, the player will then be allowed to compete in them a second time with a higher difficulty to qualify, and then return home a champion if successful. Even if a few events are frustrating (Horizontal Bar in particular can be tough to get the hang of), overall the package of mini-games is very fun. Presentation is top notch, with opening and closing ceremonies included to make you feel like you're competing at an international event. Impressive graphics (some sprites are huge) and the music and sound design do a great job as well to convince you that you're at the Olympic Games. If the 12 standard games are not enough, there are even bonus Hang Gliding and Pistol Shooting games to play during the Olympics mode in between days, the latter of which is a simple first-person shooter with optional Zapper support. There's also a mode to practice any event and a two-player versus mode in Fencing, Taekwondo, and Arm Wrestling – a versus mode exclusive. Although not perfect, there's not much else you could ask for in a Summer Olympics game experience.

Reflections: *Track & Field II* impressed so much in *Nintendo Power* previews that a young Pat had to ask for it for his birthday (my father bought it at Crazy Eddie). Thankfully, I had my handy NES Max controller with turbo buttons so I could actually have a chance to do well. That said, I never was successful at Horizontal Bar – I guess gymnastics was never in my blood. The package Konami put together here was considerable. Taekwondo, which if it had a few more moves and rudimentary blocking, could have been packaged and sold on its own. Arm Wrestling has nothing to do with the Olympics and was just thrown in. The best part about this simplistic game is that the arm wrestlers are blatantly modeled after the characters Lincoln Hawk and Bull Hurley from the 1987 Sylvester Stallone arm wrestling film *Over the Top*. – PC



Treasure Master

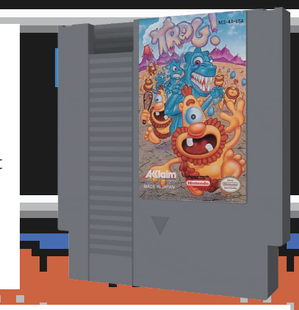
Genre: Platformer
Release Date: Dec. 1991
Developer: Software Creations
Publisher: American Softworks Corporation
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

An NES title with an interesting history, this side-scrolling platformer was actually developed as part of a contest held in the early '90s by the MTV network. The game follows a teenage boy named Skooter who finds himself in a bizarre new world through the use of a magical coin. Lured by the promise of great treasure, Skooter must make his way through all six stages, with a veritable gauntlet of enemies and obstacles standing in his way. Skooter has many abilities and can jump, climb, and swim as the situation demands. He can also collect an assortment of useful items, such as Radium Plated Boots which allow him to kick enemies, a Protective Hard Hat to defend against spikes overhead, and an Activated Time Bomb for destroying specific walls and platforms. Enemies include Cosmic Caterpillars, Mutant Dragonflies, and Monster Sharks who patrol the deeper waters. At times, the player can take control of vehicles like a Submarine or a Moon Rover to navigate certain portions of a stage. Skooter has four units in his life meter and starts the game with three lives, which can be increased by finding one-ups. Upon losing a life, the player continues in the exact same place. If all lives are lost, the game ends and the player must start all over from the beginning. The graphics are cute and cartoony, and while the controls are fairly sharp, Skooter tends to bounce backward a considerable distance when he gets hit, making it difficult to keep your footing around pits and other hazards. Overall, a quirky but fun platformer.

Reflections: As mentioned above, *Treasure Master* was the gimmick behind an ambitious contest held by MTV. Those who purchased the game on its release date were given four months to practice, until finally on April 11, 1992, MTV aired a "Secret Password" which gave players access to a secret "Prize World." Players who were able to beat this secret level would then be awarded an exclusive code, which had to be reported to the "Winner's Hotline" for entry into a drawing for prizes including a fantasy concert, or a fantasy game room with the SNES. As such, the "treasure" Skooter seeks in the game is more of a reference to the prizes awarded for successfully completing the Prize World, rather than an inherent goal. Unfortunately, there has been very little information posted concerning the outcome of the contest. I would certainly be interested in hearing more about it. Despite its obscure background, however, the game stands up very well on its own merits. – JP

Trog!

Genre: Maze
Release Date: Oct. 1991
Developer: Bally Midway
Ported by: Visual Concepts
Publisher: Acclaim Entertainment
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★



Dinosaurs Bloop and Spike must retrieve colored eggs and avoid one-eyed cavemen in this arcade adaptation of the maze game. Moving around a grid-like screen, players must collect all eggs and then head to the exit while avoiding being eaten by the Trog cavemen. Unlike most maze games, Bloop and Spike have a punch to fend off the enemies. Players will have to get used to the controls, as Bloop and Spike will continually move until their direction changes. This makes some situations precarious, and is dangerous at the edge of levels, since most are cliffs that the player can fall off of, losing a life. Besides this danger, there are hazards that pop up that the player will have to avoid, like holes and fire. Some of the levels add an inventive twist, such as catapults or teleportation portals where players will end up on another side of the screen. The power-ups are where the game really shines, though. Players can pick up items for invincibility, breathing fire, faster speed, freezing enemies, or one to transform the friendly dino into a vicious T-Rex that can eat the Trogs. The graphics are colorful with some nice animation, and there are even simple cutscenes to show the development of the Trog cavemen discovering fire or spring shoes to hop around on. A very solid two-player mode is a welcome bonus to this unique maze title.

Reflections: "Trog" is short for "troglodyte," if you're keeping score at home. These cycloptic yokels are something else, pulling out their knives and forks to chow down on the fallen dinos right on the spot! The arcade version of the game actually used character models constructed from clay, and even supported up to four players! While the NES version did not keep any of these elements, the graphics do a fine job and the two-player mode is one of the more unique multiplayer experiences on the system. – PC

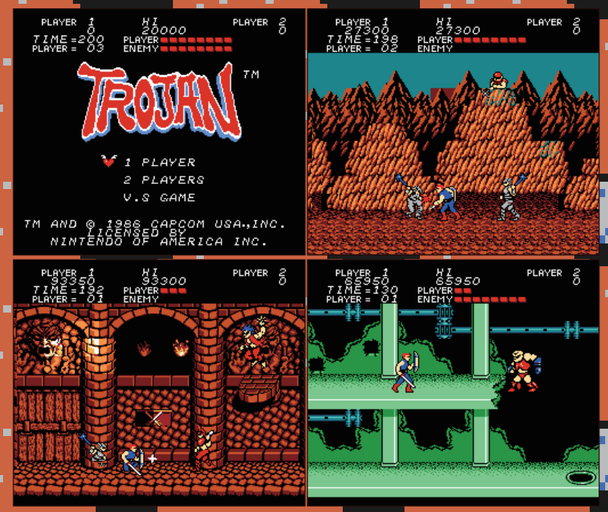
Trojan

Genre: Action
Release Date: Feb. 1987
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Players: 1-2 (alternating & simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

Players take control of a warrior armed with a sword and shield in a post-apocalyptic future. The sword can attack enemies using the B button and the shield can be used in multiple directions to block melee and projectile attacks using the A button. Players must take out foes wielding maces and axes and must watch out for evildoers firing arrows or other projectiles. The combination of the sword and shield use is what constitutes the heart of the gameplay, as players will have to block and counter attacks while moving forward to succeed. While most enemy attacks can be blocked, some projectile attacks will cause the player's shield and sword to be deflected away. The player can only attack using a punch and kick until the weapons are retrieved. It's not very impressive on a technical level, but there is enough here to keep things a little interesting, including a handful of power-ups and some interesting bosses. At the end of the day, the controls and unique gameplay are what make it work, although the difficulty and lack of health pickups during levels may be off-putting to some. A bonus two-player one-on-one fighting mode is also included, and represents Capcom's earliest attempt at a fighting game.

Reflections: *Trojan* is one of those few NES games that allows the player to jump by pressing up on the D-pad. I'm not sure why more games never did that, as having two attacks and a jump seems like a more interesting gameplay element than a single attack and jump. *Trojan* represents those Capcom titles that were released before the company really found its footing as the huge publisher it became – on the cusp of releasing *Mega Man* on consoles and *Street Fighter* in the arcades. Awww, lil' Capcom is growing up right before our eyes!

I would like to go on record and say that if all of us are required to walk the streets and fight with swords and shields in the future, I welcome the nuclear holocaust. – PC



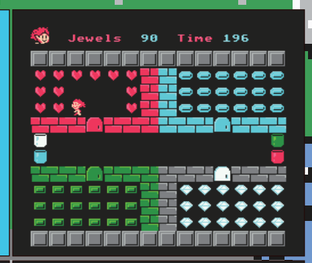
Trolls on Treasure Island

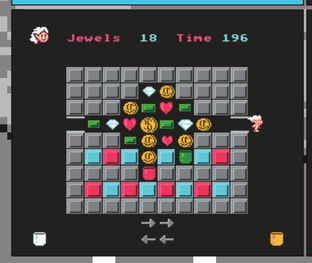
Genre: Puzzle
Release Date: 1992
Developer: Michael & Cam Crick
Publisher: American Video Entertainment
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Rare
★★★

This interesting, fast-paced overhead game consists of one or two Trolls working together to collect all the gems and hearts in a room as quickly as possible. When a level begins, the player's Troll will automatically begin running right and left switching direction whenever it hits an obstacle. The player can only control movement in two ways: pressing up or down to change vertical position or holding down A to speed up the Troll's movement with a spin. In each level are paint buckets of various colors. Passing over these changes the Troll's hair color, allowing the Troll to pass through like-colored doors and to collect objects of the same color by bouncing off of them. Some gems are hidden and will be revealed by hitting destructible blocks. The level ends by entering the door revealed when all the gems are collected, before the timer runs out. Other obstacles show up soon to add variety. Some are merely aesthetic while others such as fire can end one's run quickly. Unfortunately, level design is everything here, and only about 50 percent seem well suited for the mechanics. Some require a lot of backtracking to change colors multiple times to collect one colored object at a time. It's still a surprisingly unique and creative game, and worth at least a look for fans of quick-thinking puzzlers.

Reflections: I admire the effort put in here. I think most people would expect another below average platformer with those horribly creepy Trolls shoehorned in, but instead we get a real attempt at something different. It isn't perfect, and it could use refinement and the level design doesn't do the idea full justice. Still, this is up there as probably the best game AVE published. – IF

This looks suspiciously like *Dudes with Attitudes* with the sprites swapped out and minor adjustments made. American Video Entertainment, you've got some 'splainin' to do! This game came with a cute mini troll doll attached on the outside of the box, in case you wanted to stroke troll hair while playing a puzzle game. – PC





Twin Cobra

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Jan. 1990
Developer: Toaplan
Ported by: Micronics
Publisher: American Sammy
Players: 1
Special Features:N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⋆

This is a plain-looking, but very well done vertical helicopter shooter, where the player fires upon enemy choppers and ground targets like tanks and boats. By defeating oversized air targets, the player can earn different shot upgrades such as spread fire, rapid fire, or powerful but narrow-firing rockets. A "super charge" power-up is also available to increase the firing capability. The secondary weapon is a limited number of bombs that can wipe out whole chunks of enemies at one time. The playfield is wider than usual shooters and can be scrolled a touch to either side, which allows for slightly easier dodging of enemy fire. The enemy patterns are fun and the action the game presents feels properly paced. The biggest problem with the title is the somewhat drab and repetitive setting. Enemies are not varied, and for most levels players will shoot a ton of the same helicopters or waves of the same boats before facing the enemy boss. For those who like military-themed shooters, this is probably less of an issue, but often brown bullets on various shades of beige and green make this much trickier to see clearly and play. Despite the simplicity, the controls are very tight and this is one of the more hectic, "bullet hell" oriented shooters on the system. Well worth playing.

Reflections: Toaplan made a lot of fun shooters in the late '80s and early '90s before blinking out of existence. Many staff members went on to form CAVE, one of the most respected and active developers of scrolling shooters, who are near synonymous with the bullet hell style. – IF

Twin Eagle

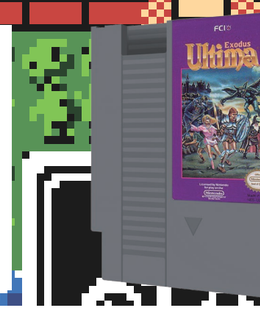
Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Oct. 1989
Developer: SETA
Ported by: Visco
Publisher: Romstar
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features:N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

This vertically scrolling helicopter shooter consists of the player destroying and avoiding ground targets (tanks, soldiers, boats, turrets), air targets (helicopters, planes), while attempting to rescue prisoners. Power-ups such as screen-clearing bombs, weapon upgrades (cannon ball, machine gun, missile, two-way shot), and speed upgrades are available. By shooting the power-up icon, the specific type will change until the player collects it. Collecting the same power-up in a row will increase its potency. Some buildings can be destroyed to reveal a hostage that can be collected for bonus points. Some buildings and trees will have to be destroyed to take out ground targets behind them. Every aspect of the game screams unremarkable: the average graphics, uninspired enemy design, ho-hum weapons, and the lack of real stage enemy bosses. Challenge only exists due to the one-hit deaths and the fact that the standard copter speed is way too slow to adequately take out most of the enemies or avoid most of the shots fired at you, since they are just as fast as the copter can move. There's nothing horrible here, but also nothing to really recommend.

Reflections: *Twin Eagle* is so average that it somehow makes all the other average games look better (probably why I gave it two stars - below average). It almost goes out of its way to be mediocre. Did the developers think that stage bosses were a bad idea? Did they think that having the copter be slower than a snail would be a challenging aspect versus being a frustration not seen in most shooters? Did they think at all about the goofy title, which in full is *Twin Eagle: Revenge Joe's Brother*? So many questions, and not enough answers. – PC

Ultima III: Exodus

Genre: RPG
Release Date: Feb. 1989
Developer: Origin Systems
Ported by: Softhans
Publisher: FCI
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⋆

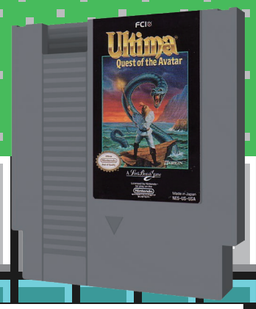


The classic PC role-playing series makes its debut on the NES with an adventure concerning a group of heroes who must stop the rise of an evil force known as Exodus. The game begins by allowing players to create a party of four characters from five races (Human, Elf, Dwarf, Bobit, and Fuzzy) and a wide range of classes including Fighter, Thief, Wizard, and Paladin, amongst others. A list of pre-generated characters is also available. Presented in a top-down perspective, the player must travel the world of Britannia battling monsters and accumulating gold and experience. The game features a menu-driven interface and turn-based combat which is initiated when the party encounters an enemy on the world map. In battle, players can choose to move their characters one step in any direction on the field, or attack the enemy or cast spells, with only one action per turn. In dungeons, the game shifts to a first-person viewpoint with the party's current direction indicated on the screen. In addition to supplying the party with weapons and armor, players must also keep track of the party's food reserves and replenish them when needed by visiting grocery stores. To level up, characters must visit Lord British, the ruler of Britannia, who will promote them once they have gained enough experience. Unlike most other RPGs, you cannot recover hit points by resting at an inn and must rely on healing spells to recover health, making it difficult to keep everyone in the party alive. In all, a decent first effort for a PC port.

Reflections: Created by Richard Garriott (known by fans as Lord British himself), the *Ultima* series has more in common with traditional pen-and-paper RPGs than with JRPGs (Japanese role-playing games) for which consoles have become so well known. Garriott has incorporated elements of western role-playing into the series, which is not a bad thing on its own, but some aspects may seem awkward when compared to JRPGs. For instance, items like food and gold being distributed amongst all characters in the group, rather than in a separate account. As a veteran of many JRPGs, I could easily do without these aspects, but old school tabletop role-players may not find them as obtrusive. – JP

Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar

Genre: RPG
Release Date: Dec. 1990
Developer: Origin Systems
Ported by: Infinity, Atelier Double
Publisher: FCI
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★



The fourth installment in the long-running RPG series sees the player's character on a journey to master the Eight Virtues: Honesty, Compassion, Valor, Justice, Honor, Sacrifice, Spirituality, and Humility. The game opens with a series of ethical questions to identify the Virtue the player's character most strongly represents, thereby determining that character's class. For instance, favoring Honor would make the character a Paladin, just as choosing Compassion would make one a Bard. The player then travels through the world of Britannia, passing through various towns, dungeons, and shrines while attempting to uphold their Virtues. The ultimate goal is to acquire the Codex of Ultimate Wisdom from the Stygian Abyss and become an Avatar, a paragon of righteousness. Since the object of the game is to become an example for others to follow, if the player makes poor choices, like lying or stealing from another character, they will be penalized and become less honorable. The game features a top-down perspective with a menu-driven interface. Combat occurs via randomly generated encounters in a turn-based format where the player can strategically direct his characters to attack or retreat. Upon victory, gold and experience points are awarded to the party. While as many as seven characters can be recruited in the game, only three at a time are able to travel with the player, with the extra characters being housed at Castle Britannia. This NES port features updated graphics and music from the original version but retains its nonlinear gameplay, allowing players to proceed on their quest as they wish. A truly impressive RPG experience.

Reflections: I never got into the *Ultima* series as a kid, but I was a big fan of the *Dragon Warrior* games. That said, *Ultima IV* plays a lot like those games, so I felt right at home with the graphics and interface. However, the "morality" system gives it a level of depth rarely seen in RPGs to this point, making the world of Britannia seem closer to a fully developed society in which your actions have real consequences. Definitely a game well ahead of its time. – JP

Ultima V: Warriors of Destiny

Genre: RPG
Release Date: Jan. 1993
Developer: Origin Systems
Publisher: FCI
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★

The fifth entry in the classic RPG saga and the third to appear on the NES, this entry sees the newly christened Avatar on a quest to defend Britannia from the tyrannical Lord Blackthorn and the evil Shadowlords. Much like the previous game, it begins with a series of ethical questions regarding the Eight Virtues, the answers to which determine your character's statistical values in three categories: strength, dexterity, and intelligence. A cutscene follows, depicting how Lord Blackthorn came to power in the absence of Lord British, the ruler of Britannia. Though you start the game with only two party members, many others can be recruited over the course of the game, with a maximum of four allowed in the party. Presented in a top-down view, the party journeys throughout Britannia, going on quests, battling enemies, and acquiring key items, such as the Shards needed to defeat the Shadowlords. Unfortunately, the gameplay is hindered by a number of technical flaws. First off, the scrolling seems unusually jerky, making the mere act of moving around in the game bothersome. Second, the controls are sometimes unresponsive and delayed, requiring a very hard button press to register any type of action. Third, the battle system is inefficient, forcing you to manually select a weapon from your inventory before you can defend yourself. Since battles happen in real time, the enemy will continue to close in and attack regardless of whether or not you're on the inventory screen, often resulting in a quick death due to the clunky control scheme. The graphics are muddy, the music loops endlessly, and the sound effects are practically nonexistent. A terrible game all around.

Reflections: While many PC games have been ported over to the NES, not all of them have made a successful transition. Such is the case with *Warriors of Destiny*, a butchered port of an otherwise well-regarded game. It's hard to understand what went wrong here, since *Ultima IV* was such a positive experience. I can only surmise that some games weren't necessarily meant to be ported. – JP

Ultimate Air Combat

Genre: Shooter, Simulation
Release Date: Apr. 1992
Developer: Activision
Publisher: Activision
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★

Players take to the sky on multiple missions to stop the plans of the evil dictator Don Gwano. Sets of four missions are available to complete in any order before a new set appears. After a mission briefing, players select one of three different jets, each with their own flying characteristics and weapon options. After selecting the weapon loadout and potential extra fuel tank, the mission begins. The first part of each mission is an air combat simulation viewed from a cockpit perspective. Players are tasked to destroy a few enemy fighter jets before moving on. Players can fire with unlimited cannons or try and lock on and fire missiles. Controls here are great, with the ability to speed up/down, do rolls, and track the enemy using radar. Players have to take heed of attacks, and can release chaff with A + B to try and counter incoming missiles. The second half of each mission is an isometric overhead-perspective shooter stage, where the player is tasked to destroy specific ground targets while tangling with ground and air hostiles. While this mode is nice as well, it's a little awkward to adjust altitude to match air targets to defend yourself against them with guns. Both modes quickly become very challenging, with players having to worry about both incoming fire and watching the fuel gauge. Thankfully, destroying some enemies will result in power-ups that can picked up: extra fuel, extra bombs, and repairs if your craft is damaged. There are only one aircraft of each type to use, which amounts to three lives. Presentation here is very nice, with good graphics and top-notch sounds, including nice voice samples. This unique combination of simulation and traditional shooter may not be perfect, but what it has to offer will satisfy most air combat fans.

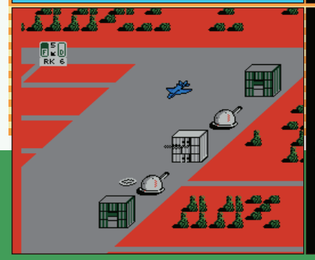
Reflections: Sometimes games can be a pleasant surprise that you don't expect. This is one of those games. While it has simulation roots, it never takes itself too seriously, and it's still accessible to more casual gamers who may not be into hardcore air combat simulation games. There's also a degree of frivolity that's seeded in the game, with a big example being right after turning it on, when a pilot rolls by in a jet and screams out "Yeah!" while giving a thumbs up. I laughed out loud the first time it happened. Not "LOL," but actually laughed and you could hear it. – PC

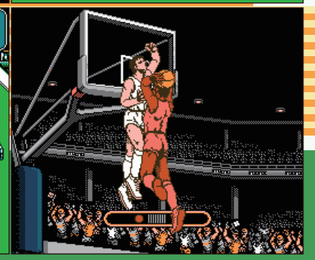
Ultimate Basketball

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Sept. 1990
Developer: Aicom
Publisher: American Sammy
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

At first glance, this side-scrolling five-versus-five basketball game seems like it's going to be a slam dunk. The on-court graphics look good, with decent player sprites and animations (the static crowds and bench players are rather bland, though). The visual highlights are close-up cutscenes of players driving to the basket for dunks or three-point shots, and these look great. The high-energy music adds to the intensity of each game, while the sound effects are fairly minimal. Off the court, there's customization for quarter length and skill level in single-game exhibitions, and there's a Tournament mode for some added replay value. Unfortunately, serious gameplay flaws quickly put this title in foul trouble. The first of these problems is that passing is practically useless. The D-pad is used to cycle through available players, and this is too clunky. Moreover, AI-controlled opponents are very good at intercepting passes and changing possession. This leaves players to try to take the ball to the hoop themselves, which is difficult to accomplish without being called for charging or having the ball stolen by defenders. Shooting requires two button presses - one to start the shot and another to release it - and it takes time to get used to this, as opposed to a single button press-hold-release scheme. When a player is able to drive the lane and shoot, the view shifts to a dunking cutscene and what amounts to a timing mini-game, where players must press the shoot button again when the on-screen meter is in the Score Zone. Poor timing leads to a traveling call and a turnover. Playing defense is somewhat better, as steals are automatically attempted and block attempts have a fair success rate. It's too bad that gameplay problems keep this title from playoff contention, as it could've been really good.

Reflections: I respect that Aicom, the game's development team, seemed to have a genuine interest in basketball. I really do think that effort was put in here, especially on the presentation side. The dunking screens are more interactive than what we saw with Konami's *Double Dribble*, and it's easy sometimes to forget that there is input needed to complete the dunk because it looks so cool. Unfortunately, other key parts of the game are flawed. Given Aicom's overall resume, though, including *Astyanax*, *Vice Project: Doom*, and *The Mafat Conspiracy*... a weak basketball game is a small blemish on an impressive NES record. – PS





Ultimate League Soccer

International Ultimate League Soccer *(AUS)*
Genre: Sports
Release Date: 1991
Developer: Computer & Entertainment
Publisher: American Video Entertainment
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Rare
★⋆

This horizontal soccer title consists of single game and tournament mode options. Players select one of eight international teams, each with skill attribute ratings in five categories. After selecting the team's formation and length of game, play on the pitch begins. The gameplay is standard soccer action: players on offense can pass or shoot the ball, and can defend by switching players closest to the ball and attempt to steal by slide-tackling. If a shot comes on goal, players will switch automatically to the goalie to try and make the save. The action is fairly slow and underpowered, even if the standard passing/shooting mechanics work alright. A nice radar map shows the position of all the players on the field, which can help in setting up the somewhat underpowered passes and kicks, especially from the goalie, who can barely kick the ball far enough to clear the immediate area. There are many elements missing from a standard soccer game, like fouls, offsides, headers, volleys, effective corner kicks, etc. Scoring goals seems to be more difficult than it should be, since the size of the net is somewhat small. It's a functional soccer experience, but nothing that could be recommended.

Reflections: At first, this looks like an updated version of Nintendo's simple *Soccer*, but then you quickly realize when playing that it's somehow worse, even though it was published five years later.

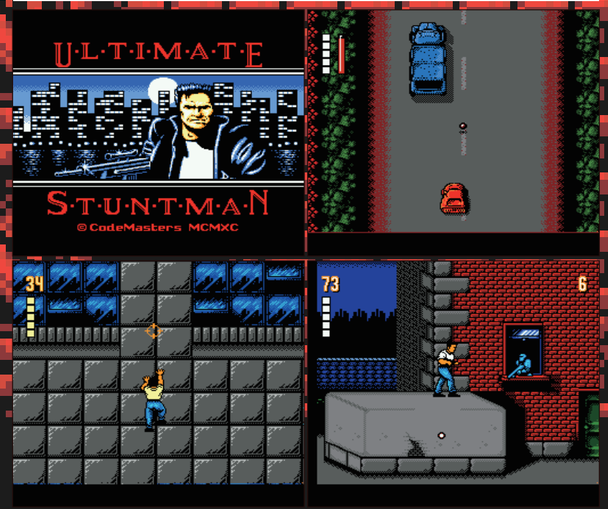
The cart graphic denotes that this is part of the "Kick Ass Sports Series" from AVE, and actually shows a foot kicking a donkey (also known as an ass). The subtle humor is killing me, AVE. Somehow, *Rad Racket* didn't make the cut to be in the series too. – PC

The Ultimate Stuntman

Genre: Action, Shooter
Release Date: 1990
Developer: Codemasters
Publisher: Camerica
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

In this multi-genre action title, players take control of a stuntman who must rescue a scientist's kidnapped daughter from Dr. Evil. Gameplay ping-pongs back and forth between several different modes. Overhead vertically scrolling driving and boating shooter levels consist of quick movement and precarious jumps (some needing a turbo-boost) before facing an enemy boss. Horizontal and vertical hang-gliding shooter stages are average at best, with subpar graphics. Interesting wall-climbing stages have the player climbing to the top while also controlling and shooting with a crosshairs to take out critters like mice. Run and gun shooter stages consist of the player using a machine gun to fend off robots while trying to collect keys to unlock the door at the end. These are okay, but level design is lacking, as the player is forced to make jumps at some point, unsure if and where platforms are below, and falling onto enemies or into pits isn't uncommon. Similar side-scrolling boss battles intersperse these modes, and are impressive for the extremely large enemy sprites. All of these different modes are competently done (if not totally refined), but the puzzle bomb-desoldering levels are a letdown. These timed rounds, following the defeat of a boss, consist of the player having to move a cursor around a grid with connected, numbered squares. Tracing over a square and then off of it will decrease the number on it until it is gone, but if the player cannot move off of it and onto another connected square, the entire grid will reset. This requires strategic planning and care, but the fact that these are timed rounds makes it a rush. Players will lose a life if the timer runs out. This experience encapsulates the overreach of the title's ambitions, not even being a "jack of all trades, master of none," with some modes being pleasant while others are a complete pain. Graphically it's impressive, and the bouncy "bubblegum" music with a great bass line will have you grooving.

Reflections: The star of the game is unabashedly a blonde-haired Arnold Schwarzenegger (who is also Duke Nukem, in essence). I love multi-genre games, but due to their inherent nature, it's very difficult to do them well and have every game type be solid. *Golgo 13: Top Secret Episode* attempts it, as does *Vice: Project Doom*, with variable results. Are there others? If only someone would write a comprehensive NES guide book so I could look up these things! – PC

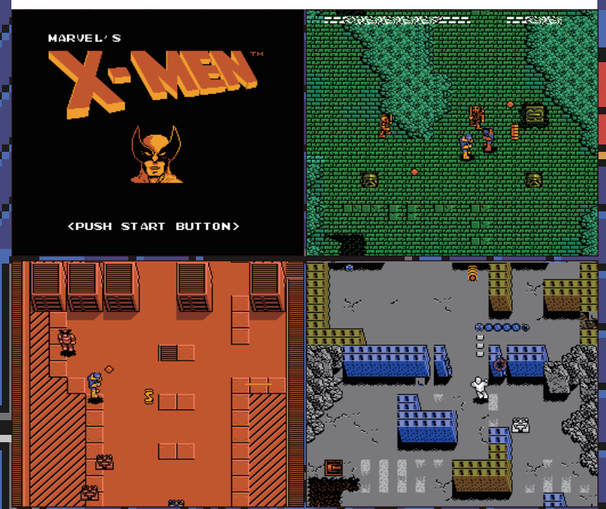


The Uncanny X-Men

Genre: Action
Release Date: Dec. 1989
Developer: Unknown (Pixel? Bothtec?)
Publisher: LJN
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★

The superhero X-Men team must put an end to Magneto's evil once and for all by fighting through four stages in this top-down action slugfest. The player chooses two of six characters who vary in stats and play style to form a fighting duo. Iceman, for example, has the ability to shoot projectiles but has less health than Wolverine, who can only attack at close range. The top-down stages range from spaceships to under-the-sea battles, but each are filled with hard to discern robots, worms, springs, and generic blobs. Slain enemies drop health and invincibility pick-ups, which become essential as the game rarely lets up. If playing solo, the computer controls the second character, who aside from doing nothing useful, also gets stuck behind scenery. This game-breaking AI forces you to kill your partner in order to proceed in places. Marry that to not picking a projectile-firing character and the game becomes even more difficult. The stages play as mazes with the task being to collect keys to open the next part that will then pit you against a boss character. Each completed stage rewards the player with a text screen, each hiding a secret phrase, that when combined give a hint on how to access to the final stage. However, it is badly worded and becomes a head-scratcher when trying to access it. The controls adequately get the job done, but there is no way to shoot diagonally, which really hinders the flow. Also, pausing the game every time to see the characters' health bars breaks up the flow. Enemies bounce the player back when hit, stunning the character, and if this pinball effect happens between two enemies it's game over. Add in one-hit-death wall traps and electrical fields and it builds up the frustration. Graphically the game is poor – the levels look glitched and messy. At times you can walk over something on the floor, but the same piece of scenery is a wall somewhere else. This is not cryptic stuff, merely a very badly made game. It's just a mess of a game with a thin veneer of the *X-Men* license slapped on.

Reflections: The game starts off relatively promising with character bios and seeing how each one differs. But these differences are so irrelevant because you are forced to pick a player that shoots. If you don't choose Storm, Cyclops, or Iceman, the game is unplayable. The enemies are nothing from *X-Men* canon bar the seldom boss fights. The secret message idea would be a cool touch if the subject matter was a spy game like *Metal Gear*, but having to look up a game guide on the internet to proceed because it's badly worded is inexcusable. The only saving grace is the two-player co-op, but you won't have any friends to play with because you own *The Uncanny X-Men*. If you are desperate for your NES X-Men fix, stick with *Wolverine* – it's not good either but it's golden compared to this. – JE

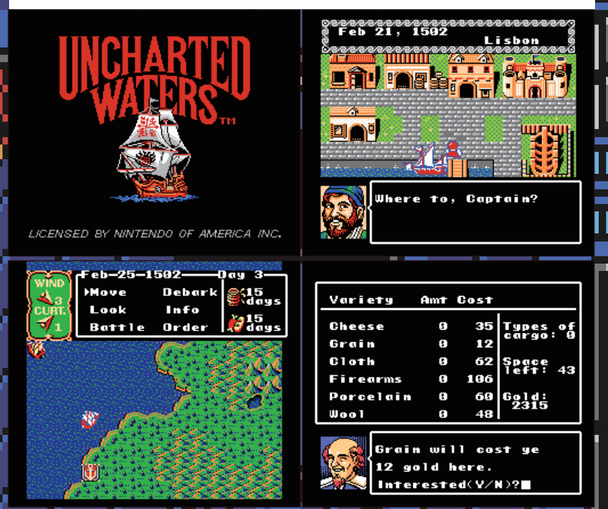


Uncharted Waters

Genre: Simulation, Strategy
Release Date: Nov. 1991
Developer: Koei
Publisher: Koei
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★⋆

Hoist the mainsail as Leo Franco in a bid to restore his family nobility in this high seas trading and piracy strategy sim. Based around Spain and Portugal in the 16th century, a whole world is available to the player to explore by ship in a top-down manner. The player begins by choosing character traits such as wisdom, charisma and courage, which assist in a range of gameplay mechanics when conversing with locals and fighting at sea. After tinkering, the port of Lisbon is available to explore on foot, where it is useful to get information from the tavern, buy goods for the ship's hold to sell for profit, hire more crew, or even gamble. Making sure to remember to stock up on food and water for a voyage is paramount, as starving on the waters is also an option! Once at sea, the player has a set number of days in which to return to a port, during which there are a slew of events that can take place. From hitting heavy storms to fighting enemy fleets, negotiating with them, or simply getting lost, the seas need to be carefully explored, which is where the difficulty lies. There is no difficulty curve – just the player's poor judgement that makes the game harder. Upon hitting land, the player can search for water and make any repairs to the ship (which degrades over time), and upon reaching a port there are the options to sell goods, talk to more people, and repeat the process. There is a degree of trial and error, as getting lost can happen quickly if the player ventures out too far at sea, which is when frustration sets in. Coming across a hostile ship triggers a turn-based battle, which isn't a big problem if there are enough cannons and manpower to fend an attack off. Graphically, the game is patchy in places, but the ports and characters lend a certain charm and add to the atmosphere, as does the sea-shanty music. The biggest negative is the amount of grinding it takes to get decent ships, which is a big factor of a sea adventure. It's fun if you don't get lost immediately and have to start the whole process again, as it sometimes feels like Leo's plight boils down a random dice roll.

Reflections: It can be seriously irritating making the wrong decision and putting the whole game back a few hours, but I guess the "learn from your mistakes" mantra of Koei games rings true here too. Once you realize not to outstretch your initial means, there is a sheer amount of depth on offer, which all comes crumbling down when you starve to death for the tenth time. Unless you figure out that staying close to land and working around it while finding ports on the way to trade with is the way forward, then this game will be unforgiving. It is a shame it takes an age to get good ships, as the child in me wanted to breeze around being a pirate and shouting pirate-y things. If you want to do that, this isn't the game for you. – JE

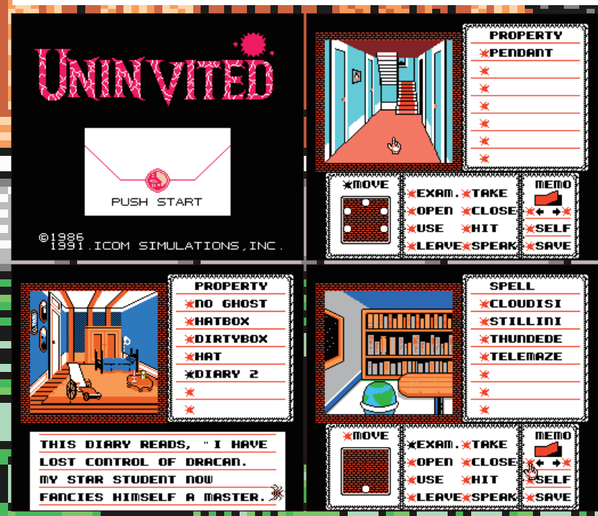


Uninvited

Genre: Adventure
Release Date: June 1991
Developer: ICOM Simulations
Ported by: Kemco
Publisher: Kemco
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⯪

In this first-person point-and-click adventure game, you play as a man whose car crashes outside of a spooky mansion on a dark night, only to find that your older sister is missing. You'll search her out while traversing the mansion and trying to survive a series of undead and other supernatural forces that are constantly trying to kill you. The gameplay consists of interacting with objects in each room via cursor and discovering how to solve a puzzle in most by using items in your inventory to interact with said objects. But beyond that, there's also an interesting mechanic via the use of magic spells, which can open up new paths if you can figure out how to effectively use them. Since the game is supernatural in nature, some of the puzzles can be obtuse. As opposed to working out logical conclusions based on real-world situations, there can be confusion about where to go or what to do in certain spots. One infamous example of this requires using a stunned spider to scare off a particular ghost, a course of action which is not even hinted at in the game. This is the type of game that requires either a guide or literally trying every possible solution until you stumble upon the answer. While the core is fine, there's little to make this game stand out amongst others in the genre – the plot is thin, the setting has little personality, and the difficulty can be unfair at times. All in all, a tepid entry.

Reflections: This was the last of three ICOM adventure games ported to the NES, after *Shadowgate* and *Déjà Vu*. However, this is the weakest of the three, as it leans on almost exactly the same gameplay, while proffering the least interesting setting or plot. *Shadowgate* may have had similarly illogical puzzles to suss out, but at least that was against the backdrop of a magical castle. Whereas here, you're bumbling about in a relatively boring house (though at least there's no permanent timer mechanic rushing you along here). Another point-and-click adventure game I can't help but compare this to is *Maniac Mansion*, which also takes place in a "haunted" house, but is so alive with intelligent writing, clever puzzles, and colorful characters, that you can't help but enjoy it, even when it's kicking your brain's teeth in. For a game released later in the NES' lifespan, this could have been much more. – JD



The Untouchables

Genre: Action, Shooter
Release Date: Jan. 1991
Developer: Special FX Software
Publisher: Ocean Software
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★

Elliot Ness and the Untouchables must stop Al Capone's Chicago gang in this multi-mode game based upon the 1987 film. Gameplay alternates between a few different gameplay modes, with the player having four lives (each Untouchables member). A third-person perspective single-screen shootout involves an alleyway fight with gangsters. The player is armed with a two-shell shotgun and has to duck behind a wall to reload, but there is a limited amount of time to kill the enemies. Another third-person perspective level has the players awkwardly rolling slowly back and forth to avoid enemy fire and shooting bottles to build to 100 percent evidence in the limited time. Controls are questionable in aiming in these stages. A mediocre side-scrolling level has the player shooting gangsters and bunny-hopping in a warehouse to collect evidence in a limited time as well. A vertical overhead shooting level has the player firing at gangsters while navigating a baby carriage to save the baby inside as it goes down staircases. Finally, there's a first-person perspective mini-game that has the player attempting to shoot an assassin holding a hostage. Graphics are impressive, and the developers should be credited for closely following the film's plot. However, the controls leave a little to be desired, and the difficulty is high, seemingly to cover up the fact that the game is a handful of short and simple mini-games strung together.

Reflections: This game seems to be heading in the right direction when you're playing it, but then you realize that the game was either a cash-in attempt on the movie's license or it was rushed (I'm leaning towards the latter). The game probably could have been constructed better as mainly a platformer with some shooting levels thrown in, but when you see how mediocre the one platforming stage is, you realize that maybe they thought that wasn't the best idea and winged it when it came to the overall game design. Collector's note: the game was re-released with a different label/title screen when the movie's license expired. – PC

Urban Champion

Genre: Fighting
Release Date: June 1986
Developer: Nintendo R&D1
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features:N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

In this one-on-one fighting game, two players fight it out on city blocks to control their turf, which includes discount shops and snack bars. Each stage is set up as rounds, with the fighting beginning in the middle of a street block. On a horizontal plane, fighters start on the opposite side of the street and must force each other to the end of the street and to the next block using punches to the body and face. Pushing UP or DOWN will place the fighter's hands in a position to block the body or head. Quick punches that connect with A will push the adversary back a little bit and powerful, slower punches with B will knock them on the ground and back more. After being sent back two blocks (losing two rounds), the fighter will have an open manhole behind them at the end of the block, and if hit into that, the round will end. Players need to be mindful of the timer as well as the endurance meter that will decrease with each punch thrown. Players must also avoid flower pots being dropped from people above, and police car lights and sirens will appear and "reset" the round every now and then. It's competently produced, but the game is a little too simple to be very fun to play for long.

Reflections: Yes, it's regarded somewhat as a classic (or is it?), but that doesn't mean it's that fun to play. It will always be memorable for me though, as it's the game that I first saw and played in the M-82 Store Demonstration Unit at my local Kiddie City store. The machine would reset the game every minute, so it's not like I could really get into the depths of the *Urban Champion* experience at the time. Little did I know that that was all there was. I am somewhat concerned/flabbergasted that after you dump your opponent into the sewer (which would at least hospitalize the poor fellow), a local citizen above you drops confetti into the street as you celebrate. Hooray, street violence! – PC

Vegas Dream

Genre: Gambling, Strategy
Release Date: Mar. 1990
Developer: HAL Laboratory
Publisher: HAL America
Players: 1-4
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

In this gambling simulation, up to four players can register their name, and then are given $700 to hit the casinos to win more cash. From a menu, players can select and play one of four games and can switch off to another whenever they want to (or until the player runs out of money). Blackjack, keno, roulette, and slot machines are all available to play. The standard rules of each game apply, with the ability to place bets, with no set table limits for blackjack, roulette, and keno. Randomly while gambling, players will be approached by an individual via a window showing the person and dialog. These folks will usually proposition the player in one of several ways, such as asking for money, a one-on-one gambling encounter, asking to go out on a date, and more. The player will be given one of two choices, either agreeing to the question/demand or rejecting it. The result will play out (sometimes with an accompanying simple cutscene), with the result then shown via a news anchor in a simulated television news broadcast. The decision can be positive or negative, resulting in the player winning or losing money, such as a loan to someone being paid back at a higher value (positive), or the player being pickpocketed by a woman while out on their date (negative). This small degree of role-playing adds a little bit of freshness to what otherwise is a straightforward casino simulation. The gambling itself is fine, with bets and decisions being easy to place in the interface, and the presentation is very solid, with the spin of the slot machine and roulette wheel conveying a good sense of a Las Vegas casino. However, each bet takes a relatively long time to play out, especially when the tables scroll left/right during blackjack and roulette. There's some decent thought put into the design and random encounter events (you can even get married), but the actual gambling itself could have used a bit more streamlining. The ability to have four players gamble at once is a nice bonus, but it just slows the game down even more.

Reflections: I reviewed this game before in video form, and when I played through it then, I was tricked/deceived/robbed by every pretty woman who came up to me in the casino. I hope this subconsciously didn't alter my outlook of the women I dated afterwards. One other funny, nondating fact I should mention is that the manual actually apologizes for the game having long passwords – how thoughtful of them! Some copies of *Vegas Dream* included an activity voucher booklet and a certificate to be redeemed for free meals, cash, or gambling chips in either Las Vegas or Reno. In fact, the voucher booklet advertised this game on the back of it. Obviously, this was not endorsed directly by Nintendo in any way. It's this type of quirky gaming-related merchandise that I love to collect. – PC

Venice Beach Volleyball

Genre: Sports
Release Date: 1991
Developer: Idea-Tek
Publisher: American Video Entertainment
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★

This beach volleyball title consists of a few different game options and four different selectable teams with different attributes for receiving, spiking, and speed. Strangely, both members of each team look the same. Options include selecting the difficulty, number of points per game (five, 10, 15), number of games per set, and normal or rally point rules. The gameplay mechanics are what you'd expect from a volleyball game: serving, receiving, setting, spiking, blocking, and diving for balls about to hit the sand. While it takes a little bit to get used to the timing of spikes due to the quick sets, the controls are adequate. The only troublesome downside to the gameplay is when receiving the ball, since at times the game will inexplicably give the player control of the team member further away from the incoming ball. Other than the helpful crab who retrieves the ball after each point, there isn't really much here in terms of bells and whistles. The realism is somewhat lacking, since the ball seems to never bounce off the net or even go out of bounds. In terms of presentation, the music and graphics are both very average, and there aren't alternate game modes outside of defeating the three other teams in a row.

Reflections: There's something really adorable about AVE's animals in their sports games. First it was Ross the Rad Racket Rodent and now it's Sandy Claws the crab! AVE may not have much style or very competent coding skills, but they sure try when it comes to the cute factor!

Venice Beach Volleyball has the distinction of having the most sexually gratuitous game art of the entire NES library. We get a nice view looking up at two beach volleyball bikini babes jumping at the net, and we get to see about 95 percent of one's derrière in the process. Now I'm not totally complaining about the marketing attempt on AVE's behalf, but if they ever thought that they would get into Nintendo's good graces as a licensed publisher at all, that idea would have been tossed out the window at this point. – PC

Vice: Project Doom

Genre: Action, Shooter
Release Date: Nov. 1991
Developer: Aicom
Publisher: American Sammy
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★

Detective Hart sets out to investigate the manufacturer of a deadly gel substance in this multi-genre action title. Most levels take place in a side-scrolling action perspective, with the players armed with three weapons that can be switched among: sword, short-ranged pistol, and grenades, the latter two requiring ammo pick-ups. Gameplay in these levels is crisp and smooth as players take out thugs, ninjas, robots, and the like while platforming and climbing ladders to reach the end of levels. Switching between weapons is key at points to mitigate risk and help not take unnecessary damage. Plenty of precarious pitfalls and hazards like treadmills and spikes must be navigated, which can be rough when dealing with enemies in the air who can knock the player back. Several difficult sections might seem unfair, requiring very high levels of skill to be successful. Very fun battles against well-designed bosses await the player if they make it through. Coins from defeated enemies can be picked up for an extra life for every 100. Interspersed with the side-scrolling modes are two overhead car shooter stages and two first-person rail shooter levels. These are not the deepest, but are polished and a nice bonus and change from the standard levels. Technically, the game is excellent, with great graphics, music, and nice cinematic cutscenes that drive a twisting, techo-thriller story.

Reflections: It's obvious that the developers took inspiration from Tecmo's *Ninja Gaiden*, with the protagonist using a sword, similarly styled cinematic cutscenes, and annoying birds that swoop back and forth that attack the player. By now, my love of multi-genre games should be pretty clear, and here it's done very well. In fact, I would venture to say that the game needed more of the vehicle shooter and first-person shooter levels. I would just say that the story didn't hold my interest nearly as well as it did in *Ninja Gaiden*, but that's probably just due to personal preference or the fact that I accidentally skipped through one part of the story and got lost later. – PC

Videomation

Genre: Creativity
Release Date: June 1991
Developer: Western Technologies
Publisher: THQ
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★⯪

This drawing utility program features a variety of tools and features, all available via a point-and-click interface. There are over a dozen different color palettes, each consisting of 10 colors that may be utilized at one time. Artists have the ability to draw singular lines, connected lines, circles, squares, and color in areas using the paint bucket tools. If mistakes are made, an eraser tool is available to manually erase, but there is no handy "undo" tool to take back an egregious error. Other bonus tools include stamping readily available mini-pictures as well as the ability to strangely add pre-designed small animations to your drawing. The manual recommends using a VCR to record your drawings, as unfortunately there is no way to save them on the cartridge. While a valiant effort to enable players to try and create some artwork on the NES, the console and the controller, while competent, may not be the best platform to try and replicate Da Vinci.

Reflections: I'm not sure why the name of this program is "Videomation," when you do not have the ability to do any animation or video creation. Ah well, maybe I'm thinking too literally. Remember, at this time, we were still years from PCs with *MS Paint* being commonplace in people's homes, but years after the very short-lived LJN Video Art standalone system. It's an oddity on the system for sure, so for that alone it's memorable, if not worth playing besides out of strange curiosity or wanting to draw a cute cat you named Cuddles on your NES.

I will give the game credit for having one cool feature: When free-drawing, the game plays music until the pen stops moving, similar to Mortimer Ichabod Marker from *Picture Pages*! By the way, I usually don't comment on the screenshots during my reviews, but take a look at all those beautiful illustrations I created below. QUALITY. Art book coming out next. – PC

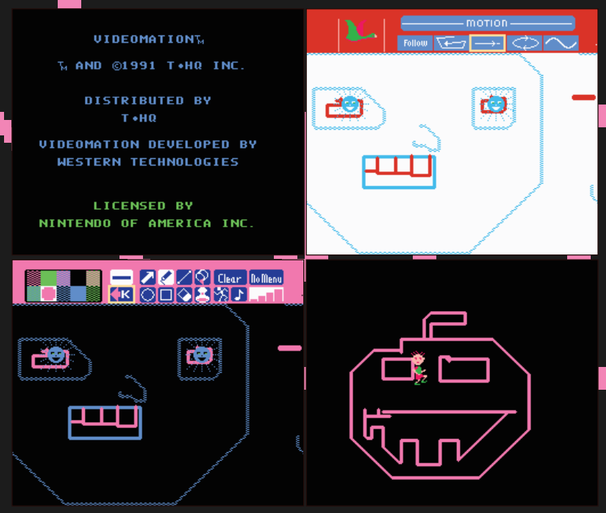
Vindicators

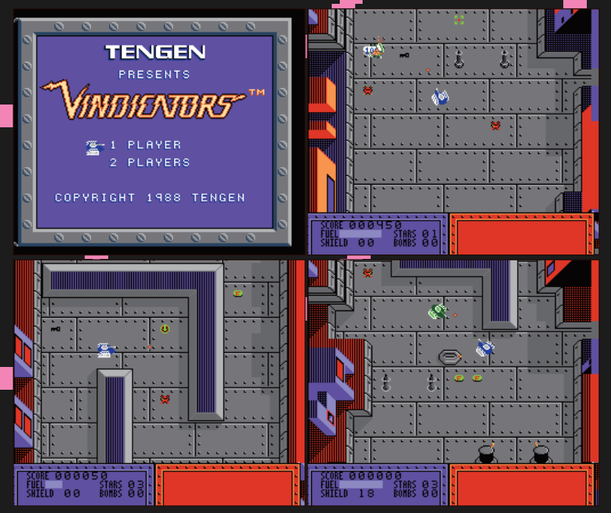
Genre: Shooter
Release Date: 1988
Developer: Atari Games
Ported by: Westwood Studios
Publisher: Tengen
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Common
★★★

Players take control of a tank (or two with a friend) in this overhead shooter. The objective of each stage is to travel from bottom to top, collecting a key to open one of two doors to advance to the next stage. The player must destroy enemy turrets, tanks, hovercrafts, and saucer ships along the way, using the standard cannon, and homing missiles and bombs, which are limited but can be collected during the stage. Obstacles, land mines, and electricity fields must be maneuvered around. The tank's fuel/energy is constantly depleting, so players must collect fuel during levels to survive, as well as stars, shield, and extra missiles/bombs. At the end of each level, the stars may be used to upgrade the tank's speed, shot power, shot length, and also resupply the tank's shield, fuel, and missiles/bombs. Although the stages can get repetitive, and the lack of strafing is a disappointment as the game gets tougher, gameplay is fast-paced and smooth, making for a fun tank-blasting experience.

Reflections: *Vindicators* is yet another great mid-late '80s Atari arcade release that was very unique and had its own controller scheme (two separate joystick controls). You could not move the turret independently and strafe in this version, so it suffers a little bit for it on the NES.

The game takes place in 2525 when we're trying to fend off an alien invasion. I would hope by then that we would have developed something slightly more powerful and sophisticated than a tank to defend the earth from invaders. If not, then I welcome our new alien overlords. – PC





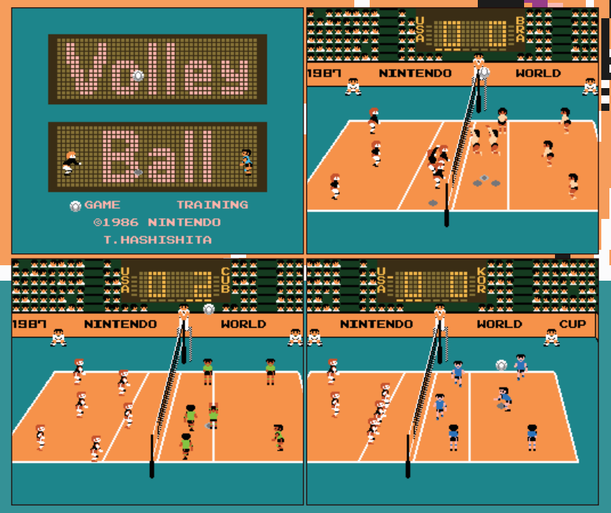
Volleyball

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Mar. 1987
Developer: Nintendo R&D1, Pax Softnica
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1–2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

This indoor six-on-six volleyball game features single match competition. After selecting either a men's or women's team (the only difference is appearance) and one of several world opponents of varying difficulty, the match begins. On the surface, the game appears simplistic but there is a surprising layer of complexity underneath. After serving, the typical volleyball action occurs: bumping, setting, and spiking – the true way to score points. After setting to a teammate via the A button, the player must press the B button as the ball is coming down towards the player. Using the D-pad, the player can do a directional spike, feign and do a soft spike over opposing blockers, or even hit one powerful enough to put defenders on their butts. Unfortunately, since the ball is hit/set ridiculously high and out of screen, it can be difficult to fully time spike hits consistently. On defense, players can do a difficult "dig" and at the net can bunch together to attempt to block spikes (with up to two defenders jumping at the same time). What's very impressive about this early title is the physics involved: the ball can be deflected off the net as well as players' attempted blocks in a fairly realistic fashion. While there aren't many options or frills, this barebones indoor volleyball experience (the only one on the NES) gets the foundation right enough for a whirl.

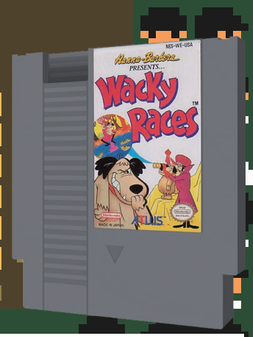
Reflections: This is a title I had to give multiple chances before truly understanding the depth involved. I was turned off usually by the finicky spike timing, but after learning it well enough, I discovered that the game conveyed a refined version of indoor volleyball. In fact, I would venture to say that *Volleyball* was the most accurate Nintendo published sports title in capturing the gameplay spirit up to that point in time. While games like *10-Yard Fight* and *Soccer* resemble the sport on paper, they are more cardboard cutouts of the actual experience.

And yes, the players in *Volleyball* do appear to be constantly humping the air. – PC



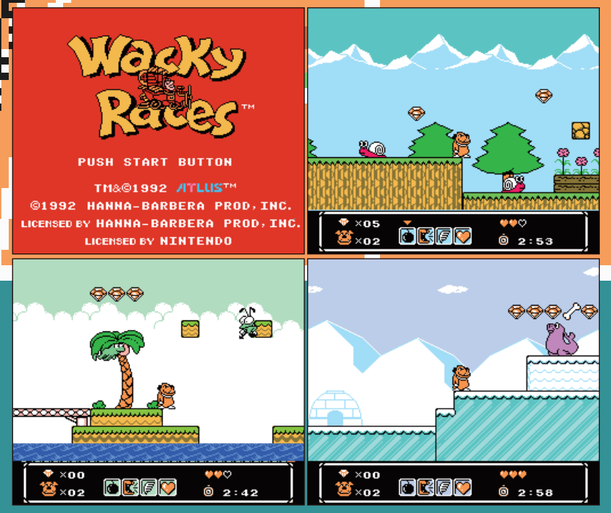
Wacky Races

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: May 1992
Developer: Atlus
Publisher: Atlus
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★★



This bright and colorful platformer is based on the classic Hanna-Barbera cartoon of the same name. Oddly enough, this isn't a racing game but a platformer where players will control Muttley as he is tasked to help Dastardly get out of trouble, get new engines, and so forth. There are three selectable stages at the beginning of the game, each containing three to four levels. While these can be played in any order, they are more or less organized from easiest to hardest. Muttley starts with a weak, close-range bite to attack, but this changes very quickly due to the power-up system this game uses. There is a bonus meter at the bottom displaying a bomb, a BOW, a wing, and a heart. Bones litter the levels, and with each bone collected the meter advances one. When it highlights a power-up the player wants, they may cash in their bones. Bombs are an arcing projectile attack. BOW is a linear barking attack with a long start-up. The feather allows Muttley to wag his tail mid-air and slow his descent. Lastly, the heart will not only refill Muttley's life meter but add an extra heart to extend it. Levels are standard platforming fare but laid out quite nicely with awesome, funny-looking enemies, from flowers with shades to kooky-looking crabs. The art style is great and everything comes together nicely, even though nothing really looks like it came from the cartoon that inspired it. Levels range from castles to tombs to icy fields, and the music is nice, as is the gameplay and scenery. The average level isn't the most difficult, but some well-placed tricky spots and some pretty challenging boss fights against the vehicles of other racers help keep the game enjoyable for players of most skill levels. While it avoids the source material almost completely, this still ends up being a truly solid platform game.

Reflections: This is actually one of the Hanna-Barbera cartoons I enjoyed most as a kid. They were just ridiculous. Unlike the other Hanna-Barbera properties, this title was developed by Atlus, not Taito, and I think it's just a touch better than the rest. – IF

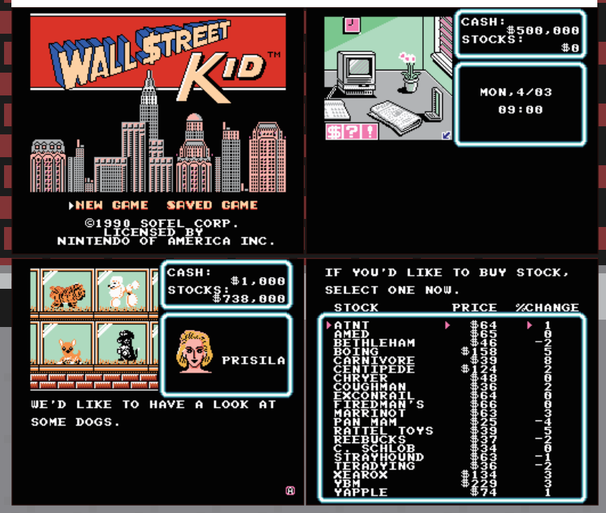


Wall Street Kid

Genre: Strategy, Simulation
Release Date: June 1990
Developer: SOFEL
Publisher: SOFEL
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⋆

In this point-and-click game, players buy and sell stocks to raise money to afford the lavishes of life. To prove himself and inherit the vast Benedict fortune, the player is seeded $500,000 and must raise more capital to afford a mansion, a luxury yacht, and finally enough to win a castle at an auction. These goals take place at the end of every month, with the player having available days to buy/sell stocks Monday to Friday. At the start of each day, the player is presented with a newspaper with news on what category of stocks are "hot" at the moment, including a handful of individual stocks. The player's office is presented with various objects that can be clicked on, including the computer, which is where the stock information is held. The player may look at stock information for different companies, which are playful parodies of real ones (for example: Yapple for Apple), and then buy and sell stocks. During the day, the player may also take time out to exercise (gym, swimming, hike) or do an activity with their girlfriend Prisila (shopping, picnic, carnival). There's also the ability to seek stock advice for $1,000, or buy/pay back a loan. All these activities take time out of the day. When the day ends at 5 p.m. (or the player clicks the clock to advance), the next day begins the cycle anew. The player can see how much was gained or lost on stocks before deciding to buy, sell, or stay with the same portfolio for the day. The game amounts to time management, selecting and staying with the proper stocks, and making sure to spend at least some time with Prisila and exercising, as ignoring either long enough can end the game. Along the way, the player will be asked to spend cash on the girlfriend on some weekends for a dress, jewelry, car, etc., which can take valuable investing cash away from the player, but is necessary to keep her happy. The only challenge presented is reading the morning paper to see what's a good investment. While the colorful, well-presented interactions with various humorously named characters can break up the monotony, the "excitement" of the story isn't quite enough to hold the stock-buying experience together as something enjoyable.

Reflections: I'm not sure who this game is supposed to appeal to, but points to SOFEL for giving it a go. The experience makes me not want to have any investments at all, nor a girlfriend who demands I spend at least $10,000 on a party. Connie, who gives you stock tips for $1,000, I actually grew to like, since her really bad jokes and puns fit my sense of humor. She seemed like someone I'd actually want to spend time with, instead of the yuppie gold-digger girlfriend Prisila. Putting up with her extravagances was definitely not worth the $600 billion (!) inheritance I was trying to claim for myself. F it, I'm going to live in the woods somewhere and live off of pine cones and tree bark. – PC



Wally Bear and the NO! Gang

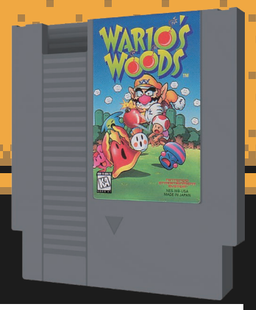
Genre: Platformer
Release Date: 1992
Developer: American Game Cartridges
Publisher: American Video Entertainment
Players: 1–2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★⋆

Wally the bear has to skateboard across town to attend a party while also spreading an anti-drug message in this action platformer. Wally skateboards along side-scrolling levels while trying to avoid dogs, Ricky Rat, Larry Lizard, and more, including very annoying birds who move randomly with no pattern. Wally moves fairly slowly with an average jump to start, but by collecting skateboard power-ups can increase his speed and jump height. Collecting flying disc power-ups allows them to be thrown to fend off enemies. These collected extra boards and frisbees act as a shield to losing a life if hit, at the cost of losing their ability. The graphics, music, and enemy design all scream mediocrity at best, with the level design being poor. Some levels, like the sewers, contain too many tough jumps that have to somehow be contended with while avoiding falling slime and the aforementioned birds. On the flipside, stages like the cities and subway ones are incredibly simple, offering no real challenge. At the ends of the stages, Wally will converse with an animal friend in a cutscene who will inform him of an issue someone is having with substances like drugs or alcohol, or other issues like having to retrieve a stolen item. In this way, a thin "story" exists, which is really an excuse to convey knowledge like don't drink and drive, and to not talk to strangers offering candy. While designed to help keep kids safe and off drugs, it certainly wasn't designed for enjoyment.

Reflections: Toby Turtle, who Wally prevents from joining a gang, comes across as having arguably the least amount of self-esteem of any character in the NES library. He "didn't know what to do" until Wally had to inform him that anyone who tries to force you to use drugs is probably not your friend. I already knew that myself at a young age, and that was without a video game bear on a skateboard telling me so. This unintentionally funny anti-drug game was somehow endorsed by the American Medical Association. A phone number provided during the game (1-800-HI-WALLY) could be dialed to listen to Wally speak to you about staying off drugs, and it was somehow active until 2007. The manual itself is a trip, advertising a mail-in subscription to the "Wally Bear and the NO! Gang Club," which offered a poster, stickers, and a newsletter. I have never seen evidence of anyone who has taken advantage of this offer. There's also handy instructions how to take apart and solder (!) a jumper on your NES board in order to get around the lockout chip on newer model NES systems. If you purchased this game in 1992 and could not play it on your system, you should have accepted that as good fortune and moved on with your other nondrug activities. – PC

Wario's Woods

Genre: Puzzle
Release Date: Dec. 1994
Developer: Nintendo R&D1
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★⯪

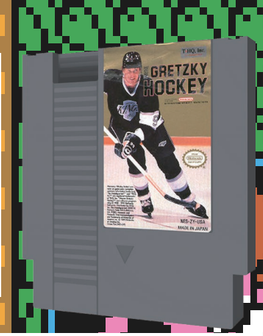


In this puzzle game, players must clear the play area of falling colored creature blocks. This is accomplished by combining two or more like-colored blocks with a bomb of the same color. If this combination is accomplished horizontally, vertically, or diagonally, the blocks will be destroyed and the other blocks will fall in their place. Unlike other puzzle games, here the player takes control of a character, Toadstool, to run around and move the blocks and place them. Toadstool can lift and carry one block at a time or a stack before placing it down on top of other blocks. When not carrying blocks, Toadstool has the ability to walk up and around stacks in order to get to the other side, and can perform other nifty maneuvers like taking a block from the middle of a stack, or maneuvering a stack to catch like-colored blocks while falling. The round ends when all creature blocks are destroyed, leading to the next level. If the player takes too much time, the ceiling will gradually shorten, and the game will end when there is no more space left to maneuver. A clever spin on the traditional puzzle game, the strategy involved comes down to more fast movement and reaction versus replanning and intelligent engagement overall. The regular game mode disappointingly becomes tedious but is broken up time to time with peculiar boss battles. Other modes include timed runs and versus play, while the battery backup handles taking care of progress and keeping records. These extra features dress up the title nicely, and very good graphics and sounds shine up what otherwise would be a ho-hum affair.

Reflections: The last officially licensed NES title released, *Wario's Woods* brought to a close a grand era of video games. In 1985, the NES was released to a dying home console game market, but by 1994 it was saying goodbye to a once-again thriving market that it nourished for nine years. During this long period, the NES saw competing game companies rise (Sega) and old friends wither away (Atari), all the while making a giant stamp on not just the video game industry, but also pop culture and the world at large. The story of a Japanese playing card company from the 19th century somehow surviving and thriving as a world video game superpower seems like an unlikely one, but alas, here we are talking about and celebrating the rich game library of one of its consoles. Many franchises from the NES still even exist in some form on Nintendo and other company game systems to this day. It almost brings a tear to my eye, and it's a shame that this book could not close on this poignant moment. Instead, you'll have to continue on and read about an awful sports game next. – PC

Wayne Gretzky Hockey

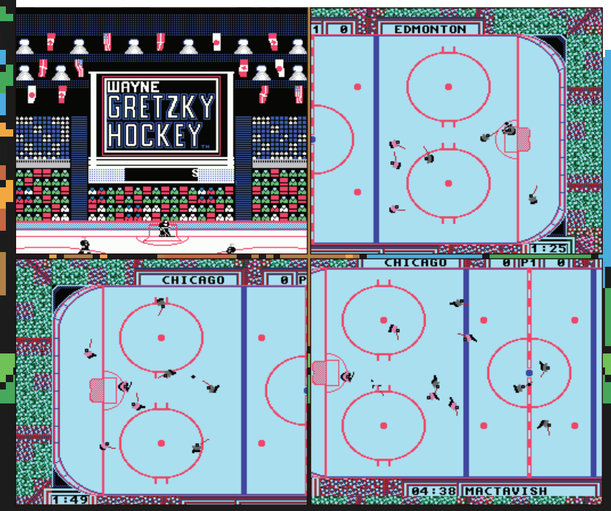
Genre: Sports
Release Date: Jan. 1991
Developer: Bethesda Softworks
Publisher: THQ
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★



This overhead horizontal hockey game is more likely to anger fans of Gretzky than inspire any hockey thrills. The controls are cumbersome, with players being sluggish and fairly unresponsive. The game also commits the glaring mistake of assigning an essential action, changing the player in control, to the Select button, which never stops feeling awkward, since reaching across with the right thumb is a stretch, and letting go of the D-pad is simply a dumb idea. Passing, shooting, and checking are all handled by the A button, while the B button is used to call for a pass. Forgoing the usual offense/defense button configuration seen in other hockey games was a huge mistake here. Graphically, the title is surpassed by titles in the same genre that came five years prior. Players are barely more than crude boxes with sticks, and too many similar jersey colors creates easy confusion trying to tell apart the already hard-to-distinguish teams. The blocky shapes also make deciphering the facing and stick positions of characters difficult, which would dig the game into a further ditch if it wasn't already so far removed from any fun whatsoever. The audio is at least mercifully unmemorable and, hey, that Jumbotron that pops up every now and again is pretty nice.

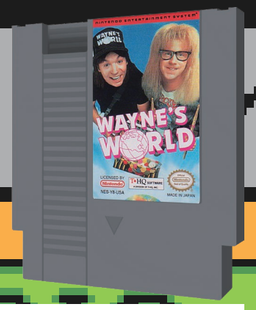
Reflections: Player-branded and endorsed video games weren't a new thing when this came out, but they hadn't yet been released in the excessive numbers we'd see by the mid '90s. It was easy for a kid who was growing up in a hockey town to see Wayne Gretzky on the cover and make the baseless assumption that this might be the best hockey game on the planet. That was the assumption my friend made when renting a game one afternoon, despite already owning *Ice Hockey* and *Blades of Steel*, and despite my insistence that I had played this trash and we should rent something else. "Those other hockey games are for kids," he said dismissively, failing to realize that we were all of about 10 years old. I took great joy in watching him struggle to squeeze any fun at all out of his rental. – IF

How did bugs get inside my TV screen?! Vermin ruining my hockey game experience! Ohhh, those are the *players* on the ice. I remember "enjoying" this game with my street hockey friend and comrade, Billy. We were not impressed by any means, and I remember finally being able to score by exploiting certain spots on the ice for cheap goals. By that point though, we went back to playing other sports games where you could actually decipher players that resembled humans. – PC



Wayne's World

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Nov. 1993
Developer: Radical Entertainment
Publisher: THQ
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Rare
★



Players take control of the goofy *Saturday Night Live* duo out to save their television show. Side-scrolling stage areas alternate between playing as Garth, armed with a taser gun, and Wayne, who uses a kick as his attack. Controls are bad – overly stiff – and controlling jumps is awkward and cumbersome. Shooting enemies isn't so bad with Garth, but trying to kick enemies with Wayne is a terrible experience due to the timing issues, bad controls, and very poor hit detection. Graphics are below average and the gameplay is simplistic, consisting of just fending off a couple of different enemy types per stage to get to the door at the end of the level. Lost health does not replenish when the new stage begins, when it switches between Garth/Wayne. This makes the game more difficult than it should be, since if a player dies as Wayne they have to restart the prior stage area as Garth to get back to where they were. Health upgrades are available in between levels in bonus areas or by defeating black cats, but the clunky Wayne areas are still too painful to play through. The only real highlights (if you can call them that) in the game are sound samples taken from the show and simple cutscenes where Wayne and Garth speak to each other in dialog balloons using their quintessential verbiage. However, even die-hard fans of the show/movies should avoid this game like the plague.

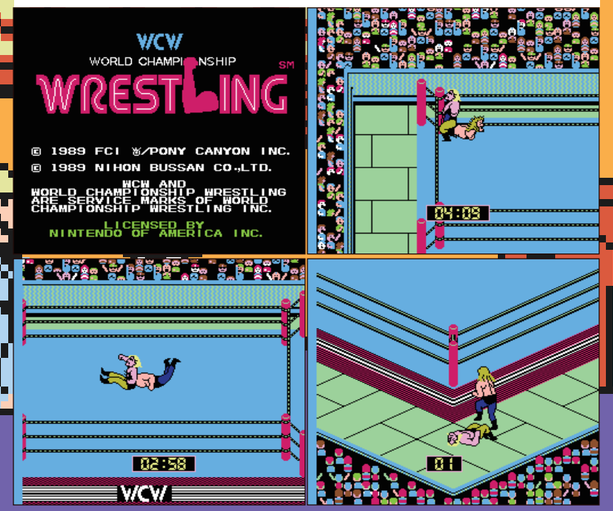
Reflections: I was never the biggest fan of *Wayne's World*, but fans of the show/movies still deserved much better than this. THQ had the pleasure of just acquiring television and movie licenses willy-nilly and then publishing subpar games, attempting to rely on just the license itself to sell game carts to unknowing gamers – quality product be damned. When people try to bring up LJN as the worst NES licensed-game publisher, I always try to point out that THQ, in fact, was the worst. Not only did they publish some clunky, sub-par games of which none are good (even LJN managed a few good ones), they also ruined several opportunities for decent television and movie game adaptations due to their incompetence and lack of care – a much more egregious sin. – PC

WCW: World Championship Wrestling

Genre: Wrestling
Release Date: Apr. 1990
Developer: Nihon Bussan
Publisher: FCI
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⯪

This professional wrestling game features 12 colorful wrestlers from the National Wrestling Alliance, like Sting and Ric Flair. Players can compete in singles mode or tag team action to try and defeat the other wrestlers and capture the championship. Players select their wrestler(s) and then can create their own moveset by choosing four of eight possible moves that can be mapped to A + D-pad directions when grappling. In the ring, graphics are nice, with large characters who all look like their real-life counterparts and good animation in the running and wrestling moves. All grapplers are equipped with a punch, leg kick, headbutt, body slam, and the ability to perform two running/rope moves, which vary per wrestler. Gameplay consists of punching or kicking until the opponent falls to their knee. When this occurs, the player can approach the downed wrestler and perform one of their grapple moves. Holding A plus a direction will bring a up combination move power meter and health of the opponent. It will scroll back and forth, and if the player releases A at the height of the meter, their well-animated attack will result in the most damage dished out. This is how the match will progress, with kicks/punches to weaken each other and performing grapple moves until one of the wrestlers has little health left. When that happens, a successful pin attempt could occur, or performing the unique special move for each wrestler via A + B when the wrestlers are in the center of the ring. If play moves to the outside of the ring, a wrench may be used to bash the other wrestler. The game looks good, the wrestling moves look great, and there's a nice variety of them. However, the mechanics of trying to weaken opponents constantly via strike attacks doesn't amount to that much more than button mashing and luck to see who gets their hits in first. It's frustrating, especially when facing the computer, who can get on a roll and get several series of strikes/grapple moves in with relative ease, with little chance for the human player to retaliate. There's a lot to like here, with the large roster and unique moves, but the core gameplay experience can be a turn off.

Reflections: I used to watch the WCW programs on TBS and remember specials like *Clash of the Champions*, where Ric Flair wrestled Sting to a draw in their famous championship match. While I was a bigger fan of the WWF, I appreciated the NWA/WCW product as well. I remember renting this title and enjoying it somewhat, but that was probably because I was using an NES Max controller and the turbo function to mercilessly leg kick my opponent. I cannot imagine trying to beat this game legitimately. I'm sure some have done it, but it wasn't fun. – PC



Werewolf: The Last Warrior

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Nov. 1990
Developer: Sakata SAS
Publisher: Data East
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

This frustrating platformer features an exceptionally cool main character. Players must defeat the evil Dr. Faryan by utilizing the power to transform into the Werewolf at any opportunity. In human form, the player has shorter jumps and punches and has a projectile shot that can be charged and released with the A button. By collecting a red "W," players will transform into a werewolf with blades for hands and gain much higher jumps and distance on melee attacks. There's also the ability for the claws to grab and cling/climb on walls and some ceiling surfaces, as well as crawl along on the ground. The werewolf can also charge and release a screen-clearing blast, but only at the cost of eight health bars from the meter, which makes its usage really counterproductive. There's also a defensive backflip via B + A that will be needed to get past certain trap spots. Players can turn into a super werewolf by collecting five anger bubbles for even greater jumps. Enemies that must be dealt with include gun-toting soldiers, ninjas, bats, mutants, and more. Dropped guns can be used for a single shot by the player. Other pick-ups include more time, restoring health, and extra lives. If health falls too low, players will revert to human form. Enemies appear far too quickly and important techniques like grabbing the ceiling in werewolf form require maddening precision. Still, the game has some nice graphics, good level layouts, solid soundtrack, and tiny story cutscenes, but controls and enemy patterns put a squeeze on the enjoyment.

Reflections: The cart label for this is one of the coolest out there, showing a werewolf tearing through the label and exposing the chips underneath. The concept of what is essentially a wolf with machete hands is right out of a third grader's notebook and definitely the best part of the game. It's just such a chore to control! – IF

Wheel of Fortune

Genre: Game Show, Puzzle
Release Date: Sept. 1988
Developer: Rare
Publisher: GameTek
Players: 1-3 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★½

In this solid adaptation of the famous television game show, three contestants take turns spinning a carnival wheel with different dollar amounts to see where it lands: a dollar amount, loss of turn, free spin (that can be used if a turn is lost), or bankrupt (a loss of turn and loss of current money for that round). The contestant may then select a consonant letter to see if it is included in the Hangman-type word puzzle displayed from one of several categories. If the letter appears as part of the word/phrase, it will be turned to appear (the wheel value will be awarded per letter) and the player can spin again. Players may also "buy" a vowel or attempt to solve the puzzle. An unsuccessful try in any endeavor will give the next player an opportunity. The player that solves the correct word/phrase wins the money they collected from the money wheel for that round. The third round is usually a "speed up" round where there is no spinning involved, but a dollar amount from a spin at the beginning of the round being assigned to all correct letter guesses. Here, the player will have to try and guess the puzzle after guessing a letter or else the next contestant will try. The player with the highest total amount after a few rounds then goes on to play in the bonus round for the grand prize. It's a by-the-book game version that has enough bells and whistles (including someone resembling Vanna White) to appeal to fans of the show. It's a shame there's no save feature to maintain the player's monetary progress, but hey, it's got the theme song!

Reflections: My main exposure to this game was first via the IBM PC version, where Vanna wore her ugly CGA green dress with her awful CGA red hair. The NES version I mostly played on vacations, when I used to borrow it from my grandparents' neighbor. He was a 40-year-old who had 100 or so NES games all sealed brand new on his shelf (at the time, a majority of every game that had been released for the system). Later in my collecting days I tried to find out if there was a way I could get in touch with him to purchase the NES games that were probably still sealed. No such luck. – PC

Wheel of Fortune: Family Edition

Genre: Game Show, Puzzle
Release Date: Mar. 1990
Developer: Rare
Publisher: GameTek
Players: 1-3 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★½

This follow-up to *Wheel of Fortune* is virtually the same as that puzzle-solving game, except the puzzles here are simpler to cater to a younger audience. The prizes are also more tailored towards children, since it's not prudent for children to want to win cars – at least that's the message conveyed.

Reflections: You would think that this game would be like the *Family Double Dare* show with family teams, but it's not. Not that I would care if it was. – PC

Wheel of Fortune: Featuring Vanna White

Genre: Game Show, Puzzle
Release Date: Jan. 1992
Developer: David Wiebenson, Imagitec Design
Publisher: GameTek
Players: 1-3 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

The last of the *Wheel of Fortune* games looks entirely different from the previous three games. Like on the television show, players will spin a wheel for monetary values, and then guess letters from a word/phrase puzzle in order to solve them (if they appear in the puzzle, the player is awarded the amount on the wheel). Goofy cartoon graphics are standard here with the new feature of being able to choose what your player looks like from one of six ugly models. There are really only two other differences from the three other prequels: the first is the updated bonus round to match the changing television show's rules (an improvement), and the second is how it looks when you spin the wheel. In the other three games, you can see the wheel spin with all the monetary values attached to the wheel. Inexplicably, here the developers removed the ability to see the wheel's values as it spins, only showing the current one that the arrow is on, which makes it seem like the value you land on is more random, removing a fun and essential part of the experience of anticipating what is coming up. A digitized Vanna White picture greets you during the game's opening, but other than that and her visage on the cart's cover, it doesn't mean much since the person turning the letter blocks just looks like a bleached blond with a bad suntan, and not necessarily Vanna herself. It's a slight step back from prior versions, but still enjoyable.

Reflections: I'm not sure how GameTek took a step backward with their fourth version of their game, but they did. Pat Sajak would not be pleased. – PC

TIME 214

Wheel of Fortune: Junior Edition

Genre: Game Show, Puzzle
Release Date: Oct. 1989
Developer: Rare
Publisher: GameTek
Players: 1-3 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⋆

The first follow-up to *Wheel of Fortune* is virtually the same as that puzzle-solving game, except the puzzles here are simpler to cater to a very young audience. The prizes are also more tailored towards children, since it's not prudent for children to win boats, because they probably wouldn't have their boat licenses in order.

Reflections: If it was a real show and I was a contestant on *Wheel of Fortune: Junior Edition*, I would hope that their bonus prizes were skee-ball tickets I could trade in for parachute army men and spider rings. – PC

Where in Time is Carmen Sandiego?

Genre: Educational, Strategy
Release Date: Oct. 1991
Developer: Brøderbund Software
Ported by: Distinctive Software
Publisher: Konami
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★⋆

Players take control of a detective using clues to chase time thieves to their next era and location. You start in the "present" at ACME headquarters, where The Chief gives you a burglary to solve (like Cardinal Richelieu's missing cape) and sends you to the scene of the crime in your Chronoskimmer. Gameplay takes place within its split-screen panel, with graphics on the left, text on the right, and four action buttons on bottom: "travel," "search," "data, and "abort." You get a limited number of hours to solve the case, and actions consume hours. You "search" locations for witnesses, informants, and items. It costs one hour for your first witness or informant, and scanning for objects costs two. Under "travel" you'll see four possible places to visit next, with time periods shown as line graphs. Guessing right with few clues is ideal, yet traveling costs hours, so backtracking hurts. In the new location, henchmen will appear during your search if you're correct. Keep traveling until you catch up with the criminal, but you'll need a warrant to win. With the "data" button you enter the perpetrator's description, including sex, hair, favorite author, etc., and search for matches. All suspects are in the dossier, so if you have a hunch you can guess. With a correct warrant, your Capture Robot can apprehend the thief. You can fail, but there's no game over. There's no action, little music, and minimal animation, but due to the genre this can be forgiven. Besides flat facts, the text uses uncommon wording like "titian" hair or "caribbean" eyes, demanding serviceable literacy. Even if you understand the clues, it's still tricky spending your hours wisely. Adults will have a much easier time than kids, but it's still challenging and fun, if not educational.

Reflections: It's easy to forget that *Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?* on PBS was a show based on a video game. It wasn't emphasized much at all, and the show more or less stood on its own, with nice production values, a 1940s-style set, and great music by Rockapella. It's the only children's show I can recall that bothered to try teaching geography and social studies, and the questions and challenges were surprisingly difficult. Maybe the show eventually disappeared because they ran out of kids smart enough to compete? There was also an animated series later in the '90s. At school I played the Carmen Sandiego games frequently on Apple II and Apple IIgs: *Where in the U.S.A.*, *Where in the World*, *Where in Time*. Interestingly, the NES release of this title came in an unusually large box which included a paperback *New American Desk Encyclopedia*. That Konami chose to provide a reference book for use is interesting to me, since in my professional life I'm a librarian. Not only is it not considered cheating to look for answers, but it's even *encouraged*. – KN

Where's Waldo?

Genre: Puzzle
Release Date: Sept. 1991
Developer: Bethseda Softworks
Publisher: THQ
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★

Based on the popular children's book series, the player looks at single screen "art" pictures to try and find the hiding bespectacled Waldo in the allotted time. Different picture motifs include the train station, fairground, city, castle, and more. The player controls a magnifying glass cursor and presses the A button over where they think Waldo is on screen. If correct, the player moves on to the next picture. If incorrect, time is further reduced from the countdown until it reaches zero and the game ends. The huge issue here is that the graphics are absolutely atrocious, with each "picture" filled with tiny stick-figure people with no detail, making it very difficult to decipher who Waldo is from the rest of the "people" in the picture. This reduces the game to useless squinting, guessing, and a lack of fun. If this doesn't sound insane enough, the timer is cumulative between levels and does not reset. A couple of mini-games are here to "play" as well, but they're not worth the trouble to try and reach. Stick to the books.

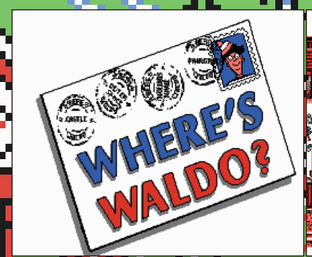
Reflections: When I am forced to play this game, for example, for my NES Charity Marathons or for writing this guide, I almost forget how indecipherable the pictures in the game are until I experience the rich artwork again. Talk about a cash-in. Let's be honest: the *Where's Waldo?* series came across as literature for children too slow to master pop-up books. But imagine their terror when popping this game in and not even being able to duplicate the stupid simple pleasure of looking at a drawing and finding some tall hipster in an ugly striped sweater. – PC

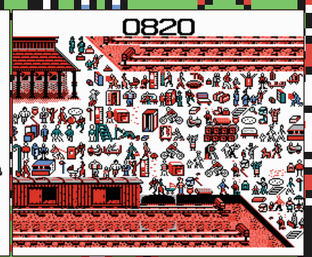
Who Framed Roger Rabbit

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: Sept. 1989
Developer: Rare
Publisher: LJN
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⋆

With Roger Rabbit in tow, Eddie Valiant must scour this multi-roomed side-scroller in search of the infamous Acme will. With all four parts collected, the duo can put an end to the evil Judge Doom, saving Toontown. The game plays out in two parts: searching various buildings for items and travelling between locations via a top-down map screen. Locations from the film are present: Maroon Cartoons, the Ink and Paint Club, and even a trip to Toontown is on offer. But the map is very drab, empty, and confusing – everything looks the same. Eddie can use Benny the Cab as transport. It takes time to master his controls but he makes Eddie impervious to traffic and speeds up travel time. Entering a location allows the player to ask citizens if the area is hiding any collectibles. Usually you get a straightforward answer, which is handy, as having to search every cupboard, desk, and plant pot becomes very monotonous. On their quest are power-ups such as six-shooter guns, boxing gloves, baseballs, and even a portable hole which can all be used to distract/attack enemies during simple bouts of fist-fighting. Enemies come in the form of cats, rats, and swooping birds – all standard stock baddies. Suit-clad weasels (Judge's hench toons) always give chase, forcing you to give punchlines to very corny jokes! Get the answer wrong and lose a life. If Eddie touches an enemy he also dies, but unfair difficulty aside, enemies usually stay on a specific plane on the screen, so they can be avoided. Roger is hardly ever used, which is a shame. Sure, you can punch him across the screen for fun and he grabs the HUD during the occasional weasel scuffle, but he is a missed opportunity. This ambitious attempt is let down by repetitive game play, looping music that resets on entering a new screen, cumbersome item selection, and unfair difficulty.

Reflections: Roger is a massive waste here, as the game could have easily been two-player co-op. He is the crux of the film, so he needed more use/oomph in the game. He should be getting in the way, swinging around room fans and getting his hand stuck in cupboards. I have to commend the developers for trying to make the game tie in with the film and to not just cop out and make a terrible platformer. There are tons of great ideas here that go unnoticed – the searching mechanic (albeit slow) is interesting and asking locals for help is a cool idea. Most people are helpful, unlike the walking sponges present in *Castlevania II: Simon's Quest* or *Zelda II*. The sections where you are caught by the weasels are also cheeky fun; it smacks of the death traps in *Nightshade*. I think there were just too many ideas floating about and not enough cohesion to tie them all together. – JE



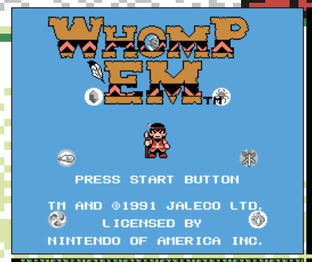


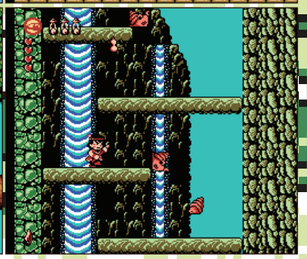
Whomp 'Em

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Mar. 1991
Developer: Jaleco
Publisher: Jaleco
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★

Guide a young Native American warrior on a quest to retrieve seven magic totems in this questionably titled but reasonably fun game. Our hero will navigate fairly well-constructed side-scrolling levels with a large emphasis on platforming and timing when dealing with enemies. The main weapon is a basic spear for attacking forwards, but it can also be pointed up or down during jumps as an offensive move. After the first, bossless level, players can choose what order to tackle the remaining stages. These stages all receive a rather unimaginative theme such as fire, water, and forest, but they are implemented nicely and lend variety to the game's nicely drawn graphics. Defeating the boss in these areas earns players new secondary abilities to help them through the game, although some are definitely more valuable than others. Dart, for instance, allows players to reach new areas, while Spiderweb is a barely useful offensive trap. Control is good, although short hops seem a little problematic, making some jumps a bit more frustrating than others. The soundtrack is decent but mostly forgettable, so players should never be reaching for the mute button. The game is quite bright and colorful, and this is a boon to the game as the extra visual polish helps cover up some of the rougher gameplay elements. Uneven all around, but still a good time.

Reflections: Eee, I cringe at the title and cover art every time. The game has very little to do with Native American culture, and the scenery and enemies can seem out of place. It turns out this game was originally released in Japan as a take on the novel *Journey to the West* with a different protagonist, so the source material is about as far from the main character in the U.S. version as possible. Then again, I don't remember fighting cute little octopuses or swarms of ghoulish green hands in the classic Chinese tale, either. – IF





Widget

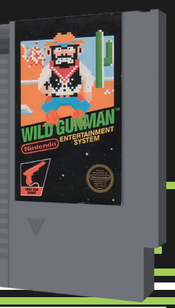
Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Nov. 1992
Developer: Graphic Research
Publisher: Atlus
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★½

The purple alien Widget sets out to save the Earth in this action platformer. Players select one of four different stages to play (a fifth is unlocked after defeating the first four). Gameplay takes place in varied environments, with simplistic ground and air enemies specific to each level who either walk or fly and usually fire a projectile at the player. The objective of each stage is reach doors that connect to other parts of the stage until reaching the end boss. Players are equipped with a blaster gun, which can fire one shot at a time both horizontally and up at a 45-degree angle. It starts out very weak but can be upgraded during the stages to be more powerful and fire quicker shots. Other power-ups include hearts to replenish health, increasing the health bar, magic points, and increasing the magic bar. Magic is used to change into a different form for a limited time via the menu. Widget starts with one form but can gain another for each stage defeated. These forms include a cannon (fires a powerful shot but cannot move), mouse (can jump higher and can get into small spaces), dolphin (can swim and fire projectiles), bird (can fly and attack), and rock-man (moves slowly but can destroy brittle blocks). Transforming into various Widget forms is essential to proceeding past certain parts of levels. If the player either gets stuck in a spot without the proper form or doesn't have enough magic to activate it, the player will have to "escape" out to the stage-select screen through the menu. Due to this feature, stages cannot be defeated in any order the player wishes, but there is a certain order due to needing the proper Widget form for the current level that can be found in a previous one. Players will also be able to go back to previously defeated stages to reach areas that could not be reached before in order to grab power-ups. This ping-ponging between levels is interesting, but the lack of true freedom or alternate paths in defeating them is disappointing. The difficulty is a tad too high in some sections, especially when jumping over pits, where there's no room for error. Graphically, the game is very impressive, conveying the look and feel of the cartoon property, and the background soundtrack is solid. It's an interesting title with some unique features, cute cutscenes, and nice stage elements, like ladders, ice, conveyer belts, etc., but the game design still seems lacking something to really put it over the top.

Reflections: Widget resembles a Hanna-Barbera cartoon creation, but it is in fact from a syndicated cartoon show that ran from 1990-1991 that focused on environmental messages. As a connoisseur of '80s and '90s cartoons, I do not recall the cartoon in the least. Am I losing my touch? Did the cartoon ever exist? Was it a grand government conspiracy and everyone's memory has been wiped? – PC

Wild Gunman

Genre: Shooting Gallery
Release Date: Oct. 1985
Developer: Nintendo R&D1
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1
Special Features: Zapper (required)
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★½



In this first-person light gun game, players shoot it out in the Old West with banditos and cowboys. Players are required to quick draw against one foe (mode A) or two (mode B) and shoot them only after their eyes flash and they yell "Fire!" on screen. If the player shoots the enemy before the allotted time for that enemy, they move on to the next duel or lose one of their three lives. Challenge ramps up as more than one enemy appears on screen, the required time limit per shot decreases, and some enemies show up in a group who are not supposed to be shot. If players shoot a gunman who does not yell fire, it's the loss of a life. It's an extremely simple game concept, but it's executed well, and the designs of the various big-sprite cowboys are both full of personality and very well done, especially for an early NES title. A third game mode, a shooting gallery in an Old West town, adds a little bit of variety, since players will have to aim and shoot at windows and doors when enemies appear, requiring a little bit more skill. It's a fun shooter experience, although the charm of the simple gameplay may wear off after a while.

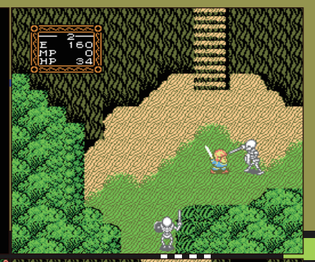
Reflections: Yee-haw! I always enjoyed *Wild Gunman*, perhaps more than I should. I always loved the romance and mystique of gun-fighting in the Old West – Wild Bill Hickok, Buffalo Bill, Billy the Kid, and other gunslingers named William. The Famicom version of the game in Japan actually featured a traditional Colt revolver-style Zapper, which is so so so much cooler than the futuristic Zapper design we got in the United States. And yes, this game appeared in *Back to the Future II*, in the '80s diner that Marty McFly visits in 2015. Wait, that's passed. Hmmm... I'm still waiting for my hoverboard, flying cars, and auto-lacing Nike sneakers. – PC

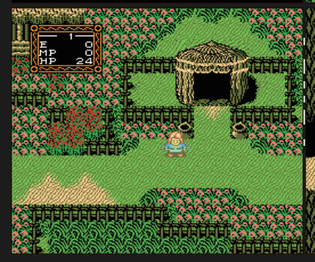
Willow

Genre: Action-RPG
Release Date: Dec. 1989
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★½

A reimagining of the 1989 film, this game recasts fledgling sorcerer Willow Ufgood as a bold, sword-swinging hero, prophesied by the goddess Fin Raziel to defeat the evil Bavmorda. The game takes place in an overhead perspective, with real-time battles and experience points being awarded for each victory. Enemies range from common bats, blobs, and bees to the far more dangerous zombies and skeleton knights. A password system exists in order to save the player's progress. In terms of equipment, Willow can obtain a variety of swords and shields on his quest. However, the weight of each sword is a key factor in the game, and he may struggle to wield them initially until he gains more practice. A few swords have special abilities. For instance, the Devil Eye is only effective against the undead, while the Wing Sword can be upgraded later on. Willow also has a wide range of spells at his disposal, from the standard healing and attack magic present in many RPGs, to the infamous acorns provided by the High Aldwin. Although many other characters from the movie, such as Madmartigan and the Brownies, are featured in the game, they exist only to provide Willow with items and information, while villains like General Kael serve as bosses to be defeated. It's a long, satisfying game with a lot to offer for any action-RPG fan.

Reflections: I was a huge fan of the movie as a kid, but somehow missed out on the NES game back in the day. Having played it as an adult, though, I can honestly say it's one of the better action RPGs for the system. It plays a lot like *The Legend of Zelda*, and indeed seems eerily similar to *A Link to the Past*, despite pre-dating it by a few years. You can even find an *Ocarina of Time*-style flute which summons a small dragon to carry you across the world map. As a reimagining of the film, the story works quite well, and the graphics are bright and colorful, as is to be expected from Capcom. Highly recommended! – JP



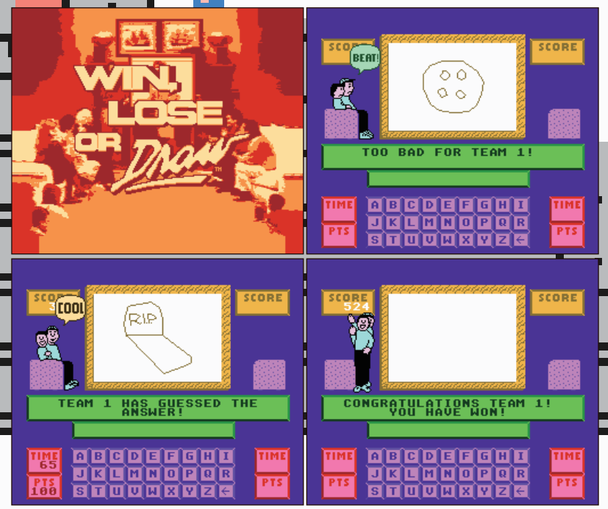


Win, Lose or Draw

Genre: Game Show, Puzzle
Release Date: Mar. 1990
Developer: Riedel Software Productions
Publisher: Hi Tech Expressions
Players: 1–4 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

This is adapted from the television game show in which two teams of two players compete against each by drawing a word or phrase and having their partner correctly guess it. Using a text parser, players can input the answer, but a wrong guess will reduce the possible number of points (although they can try again). After a handful of pictures, the speed round will come up where players can guess as many pictures as possible in 80 seconds. Options include choosing a men's or women's team for player one or two, the level of difficulty, and if players will draw (more than one human) or the computer. There's also the ability to enter a puzzle code to better prevent the game from repeating pictures, as they are provided after every game (a nifty feature). The NES version allows the player to draw using the controller (if they have a partner playing with them to try and guess). It's functional but even an artist will have difficulty controlling the drawing cursor since the movement is not that smooth. If the player does not have a partner, there is the option to have the computer draw out the picture so the player can try and guess. It's a very limited game, especially since there is strangely no mode to play against a CPU opponent team. So unless you have a party of four people huddled around an NES, or want to practice by yourself guessing computer drawn pictures, there's nothing else here.

Reflections: Come on, Hi Tech, put in a CPU opponent! If *Anticipation* had them, why not you? This came out during the "drawing party game" craze that included this and *Pictionary*. On television though, *Win, Lose or Draw* was huge with their daily game show, usually pitting two women versus two men. It was fun and frivolous, and probably the first time that modern society discovered they could draw with magic markers on large white sheets of paper. – PC



Winter Games

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Sept. 1987
Developer: Epyx
Ported by: Atelier Double
Publisher: Acclaim Entertainment
Players: 1–2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

In this rather small and lacking Winter Olympics-themed game, players are first greeted with a nice little torch lighting ceremony. Afterwards, a menu appears that will allow them to participate in all or one of the events or practice them until they are satisfied. The problem is, there are only four events representing what could have been a much wider range, and none of them are very much fun. Hot Dog tasks a skier with performing flips after a small jump. Players can also take on different poses with button combinations and combine these with flips for more points. It's not as varied as it sounds, but is easily the most fun event. Speed Skating is overly basic and simply requires rhythmic button mashing on the part of the player. Figure Skating is cryptic beyond belief. Once figured out, it's still oddly designed and not much fun. Certain inputs will result in Lutzes, axel jumps, and other moves, but they must be performed from the right stance and landing is difficult. Even odder, repeats of moves do not seem to count for points. Bobsled returns us to something resembling a good time and shows players a map with upcoming turns and a small behind-the-sled window. Applying counterweight on the turns at the right time is the key to finishing and shaving down time. This incredibly bare-bones game with only two decent events certainly doesn't make for a worthwhile winter experience.

Reflections: What a shame it is that this didn't turn out better, since the Apple //e version of *Winter Games* goes down as one of my favorite games of all time and is the first thing I boot up when I get a classic computer gaming itch. Not only does it have more events but they play and actually look better, despite being a bit simpler in terms of graphics. This is a fantastic example of a port gone wrong. – IF

I remember as a child attempting to play this game on a friend's Apple II with a joystick. I would have had better luck piloting a Harrier jet than successfully figure skating. When I was 10, my father signed me up for figure skating lessons by accident instead of ones for hockey skating. He never stuck around to watch, so I don't think he ever realized the error. I didn't realize quite myself what was going on, either. That was a fun time, and certainly not one that I'm still working out through therapy today. – PC

Wizardry: Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord

Genre: RPG
Release Date: July 1990
Developer: Sir-Tech Software
Ported by: Game Studio
Publisher: Nexoft
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★

This RPG plays like a pure "dungeon crawler." You'll begin your quest in a tavern to recruit up to six characters that will make up your party. You have eight classes to choose from in character creation, from classic RPG standards like a mage to more eclectic offerings like the samurai. Classes such as the latter are "elite" and combine traits from other base classes, like mage and fighter. Class selection depends on both your ability scores (which you'll set with a point-buy system) and alignment. For example, only an evil character can become a ninja. Once ready with a party, the game proper begins when you enter a dungeon consisting of 10 levels of mazes and monsters – the goal being to successfully navigate it and defeat the evil wizard Werdna and retrieve an amulet of great power. Once in the dungeon, you can explore via a first-person perspective that sets you in one of four directions. However, it can be easy to get lost due to the lack of a map. Random encounters will pop up and take you to a separate battle screen. These turn-based battles use a menu system with a set of choices on how to proceed based on the class of each of your characters. "Fight" will use your basic weapon to attack the enemy. "Parry" will command a given character to defend themselves, but otherwise take no action, and "Run" attempts an escape. "Spell" is available to magic users, while "Dispell" allows clerics to dispel groups of undead. Enemy parties are comprised of groups of enemies, who when defeated will give you experience points, as well as the possibility of a likely booby-trapped treasure chest. Traps can be annoying yet impressive in their variety – from a simple exploding box, to a teleport spell that will whisk you to a random part of the dungeon. In the end, this is a very basic RPG with precious few options that give the promise of choice or fun. There is virtually no character interaction, zero plot, terrible balance issues, and repetitive gameplay. The game is awash in text menus, and the graphics that do exist are simple, static enemy portraits during battle. Though this is a classic of the genre, it doesn't necessarily deserve a playthrough on the NES.

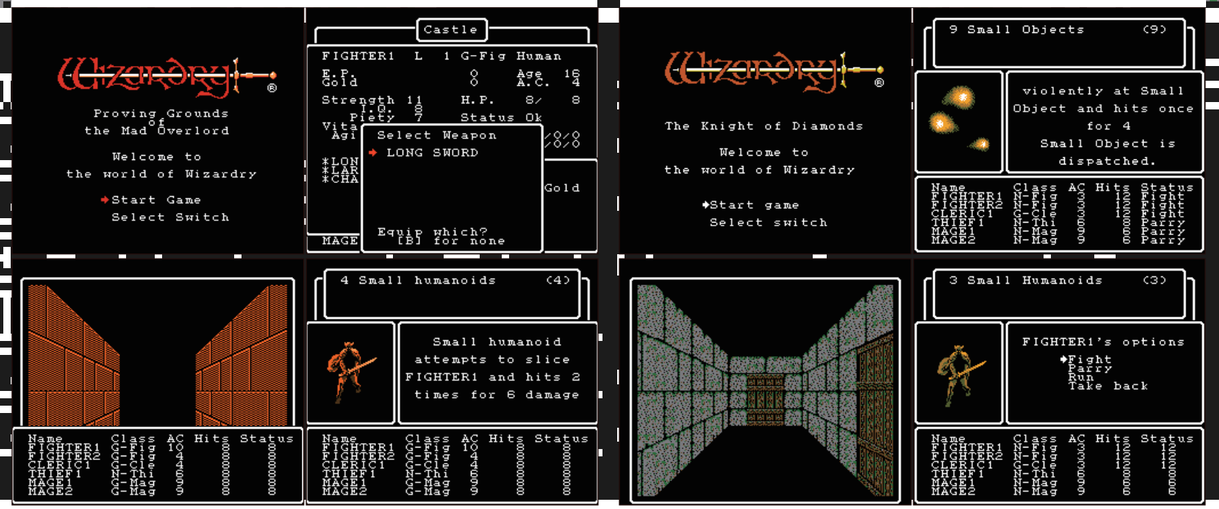
Reflections: *Wizardy* is one of the earliest and most influential RPGs ever created. Released in 1981 for the Apple II, and along with *Ultima*, it broke new ground for what video game RPGs would become. It was especially popular in Japan, where it directly influenced RPGs made for consoles. It simply doesn't work as well to port a decade-old PC game to the NES. Too much is unintuitive to be entertaining, such as the names of spells. Though a strategy guide came with this version, it's a bit much to expect such frequent callbacks to the instruction manual in an NES game. – JD

Wizardry II: The Knight of Diamonds

Genre: RPG
Release Date: Apr. 1992
Developer: Sir-Tech Software
Ported by: Game Studio
Publisher: ASCII Entertainment
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★

Taking place shortly after the events of the first title, this dungeon-crawling sequel is an RPG that does very little to make itself stand out from its trailblazing predecessor. The story is still bare bones. The city of Llylgamyn's rulers have been killed, and your party is hired to recover the staff of Gnilda, which is needed for the city to gain the grace of the god Gnilda, who will then protect the city from the ravages of war. You'll begin your adventure in a tavern to recruit six adventurers, choosing from eight classes and a variety of races that are the same from the first game. You will then enter the dungeon to first seek out a piece of armor from the legendary Knight of Diamonds on each level. Unlike in the first game, where there were a series of levels that had no specific quest in each, this armor collecting series is necessary in order to safely handle the staff at the end of the game. Otherwise, the game plays exactly the same, with a first-person view of the maze as you navigate your way through a horde of random encounters. These turn-based battles use a menu system and choice set for each character based on their class. "Fight" is used to simply attack, while "Parry" will tell the character to defend. "Spell" is available to magic users, while "Dispell" allows clerics to dispel groups of undead. Winning a battle will bestow experience points on your party, as well as some sort of monetary reward, which will likely be in the form of a booby-trapped treasure chest – which makes the trap-identifying and disarming skills of your party vital. This is a very basic RPG that plays more like an extension of the original title than a completely new game. The mini-quests on each level are new, and the graphics are very slightly tweaked, but that's about all that's different here. If you enjoyed the original and are looking for more of the same, then that's welcome news. Unfortunately, the poorly-suited controls, unbalanced challenge, and repetitive gameplay of this 10-year-old port cannot result in a recommendation.

Reflections: Originally, *Wizardry II* was released to be a direct continuation of *Wizardry* in 1982 on the Apple II. You had to use the same characters you had leveled up in the first game to even play the second, as creation of new party members wasn't allowed. Without that interesting mechanic, *Wizardry II* is an even more disappointing follow-up for what was at the time a ground-breaking and influential game. Even taking that into account, though, a decade old PC port on the NES is not going to be much fun to play, and I could recommend almost any given RPG on the system over this pair of games. Turn instead to the *Dragon Warrior* and *Final Fantasy* series that *Wizardry* helped create, instead of miring yourself in a maze of menu text. – JD



Wizards & Warriors

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Dec. 1987
Developer: Rare
Publisher: Acclaim Entertainment
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★★★

Eight stages of medieval-platforming action await in this NES game. The knight Kuros must venture through the forests, caverns, and tunnels of Elrond on his way to Castle Ironspire, where the evil wizard Malkil holds the princess hostage. In addition, he must also rescue the seven damsels held captive by the wizard's dastardly minions. The player progresses through each level battling bats, hornets, spiders, and other foes while collecting various items and treasures, many of which can be found in the pink, red, or blue chests scattered throughout Elrond. Each set of chests has its own hidden key, which also applies to doors that must be unlocked to access new areas. Kuros' default weapon is the Brightsword, which he can use while both jumping and crouching. Its range is limited, so it's not the preferred method for attacking. Other weapons include the Dagger of Throwing, which returns to its wielder, and the Wand of Wonder that can freeze minor enemies for a short time. He can also acquire potions that have temporary effects, like increased speed and jumping height. The collection of gems plays a significant role in the game as well; an invincible Guardian Knight blocks the entrance to some areas while demanding a certain number of gems found within the level. This guardian will not allow Kuros to pass until he obtains the required amount, thus making the gems a form of currency. The music is fun medieval fare and the graphics are solid, but the jumping mechanics are tricky and require a good deal of patience to master.

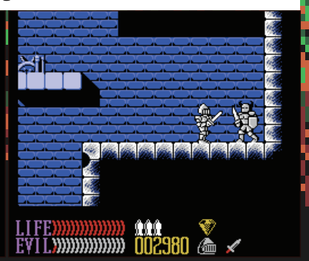
Reflections: Being a fan of all things fantasy, I liked this game a lot as a kid. However, the combat is rather awkward in that you spend so much time platforming, it becomes more efficient to simply jump into enemies with the sword, which destroys them just the same. The sword itself has very poor range, making ranged weapons like the Dagger of Throwing a must for boss fights. While it's certainly not the easiest game in the NES library, the unlimited continues are a huge plus, allowing players to practice indefinitely. – JP

Wizards & Warriors III: Kuros: Visions of Power

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Mar. 1992
Developer: Zippo Games, Rare
Publisher: Acclaim Entertainment
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★

The third entry in this platforming series finds the knight Kuros robbed of his weapons, armor, and memory after his last clash with the evil wizard Malkil, who has since taken over the peaceful city of Piedup. The game is comprised of three areas: the town, the underworld, and the palace – which Kuros can explore in a nonlinear fashion with his trusty sword. Each section has an inn where the player can purchase food items to restore health, and keys to open locked doors. Additionally, each section is home to a different guild (Thief, Wizard, and Knight, respectively) that Kuros may join if he locates the bronze, silver, and gold statues belonging to each guild. Kuros must then pass a test involving a short but challenging platform sequence, followed by a boss battle. If successful, Kuros will be welcomed into the guild and receive new costumes and abilities. For instance, the silver level Thief carries a crowbar to open certain windows, while the gold level Thief has a skeleton key for opening doors without having to purchase keys. These costumes are important when traveling through the different areas, as the townspeople will react harshly to Kuros if he is dressed inappropriately. Thieves, for example, aren't particularly welcome in the palace area. Though Kuros can attack while standing or crouching, his weapons have such short range that it's almost impossible to attack an enemy without taking damage in return, and the complete lack of continues or a password system make the game almost unfairly difficult for the average player. Only recommended for fans of the series.

Reflections: By far the most challenging game in the series, *Wizards & Warriors III* is an example of a game that looked much better on paper. Though I can appreciate the effort to make it a nonlinear experience, the combat is poorly implemented, and the platform sequences required to join the guilds are far too difficult to complete; the first level Wizard test was practically impossible for me. Although I will say, it does feature one of the most provocative Game Over screens I've ever seen in an NES game. Upon losing all your lives, you are treated to a scene of Kuros chained up in Malkil's throne room while the wizard laughs maniacally at your misfortune. Unfortunately, with no continues available, there's no chance to free Kuros from his plight. – JP



Wolverine

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Oct. 1991
Developer: Software Creations
Publisher: LJN
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★⋆

Players take control of the clawed mutant hero who must battle through several stages on the way to facing nemesis Sabretooth. Wolverine's attack is punching and kicking, which has a very short range that makes attacking enemies effectively without receiving damage difficult. Foes range from generic humanoid and android types with guns to mutated monsters. While the player has a health bar, power is drained instantly and continually when an enemy is in contact; no limited invulnerability occurs and the player is not knocked back either. The player's punch is also inefficient in dealing with enemies, but pressing SELECT will unleash Wolverine's claws, enabling a more powerful attack. The downside though is that each swipe of the claws will strangely drain the player's health. There is also a separate "Beserker" meter that will increase when defeating enemies and lower when hit. When it's full, Wolverine will go temporarily "beserk" and be invincible while attacking wildly, but this is more of a hindrance as he'll be difficult to control. Although health can be replenished via food items, getting through levels is a chore due to the difficulty in dealing with enemies as well as the many obstacles that adorn the levels. Large parts of these include precarious platforming, swimming sections, and avoiding plenty of traps instead of the traditional action of battling enemies. It's not a well-designed game, not too faithful to the Wolverine character, and not very fun.

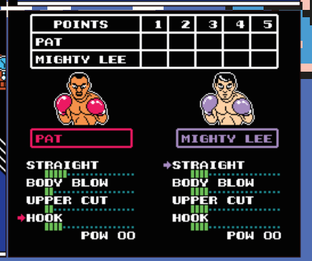
Reflections: I am not the biggest fan of Wolverine – he's written usually to be the focal point of whatever story he's involved in, he's written to be way overpowered, and his "mysterious origins" back-story bores me. That all said, he is a popular character and deserved something a bit better than what was presented here. Most of the stages don't even have a boss for Wolverine to battle, and the decision to have the claws cause self damage (to a mutant who can quickly heal, mind you) is baffling. I'd like to think it was a DC Comics covert mission to discredit one of Marvel Comics' biggest cash cows via a bad NES release. – PC

World Champ

Genre: Sports, Fighting
Release Date: Apr. 1991
Developer: Pixel, Visco
Publisher: Romstar
Players: 1-8 (2 simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★★

This boxing game features the player building up their stats and climbing the rankings on the way to the championship in four different weight classes. Players input the name of their boxer and then can spar against a training partner in order to build their stamina, punching power, defense, and speed points. Before the fights and between rounds, players may attribute gained strength points to each of the four punches (straight, hook, uppercut, body blow). In the ring, gameplay is free and fluid. Boxers can roam around the ring and can dart in and away from their opponent to attempt to punch, counter-punch, and avoid getting hit. A combination of the boxer's position and direction pushed on the controller with the A button will determine which of the four punches is thrown. Likewise, punches may be parried or dodged in different ways by a using a combination of the D-pad and the B button. A stamina meter marks the player's remaining physical health, while a momentum-based "spirit" meter builds as a boxer successfully lands or dodges opponent's attacks. Matches may seem like simple button-mashing, but there is some strategy that needs to be employed during the fisticuffs, especially when facing tougher opponents. A password allows for the game's longer "career" mode type, which will involve the player having to build up their stats via the training mode before jumping into the next match. Presentation is also very nice, with some clean graphics and nice referee voice samples. A multiplayer tournament mode (up to eight players) rounds out a very solid title.

Reflections: Let's get something straight here. *Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!!* is an excellent game, but it is not a true boxing game but rather a game of pattern recognition and reaction. *World Champ* is the finest pure boxing game on the NES, but almost no one has played it, which is a shame. It's as if someone took *Ring King*, beefed up the presentation, and then added some layers of depth and a career mode. Is it perfect? No, as the action can still seem too button-mashy and combos can happen too easily at many moments. But developers Visco were really on to something here, and were only a few tweaks and additions away from a truly special game. – PC

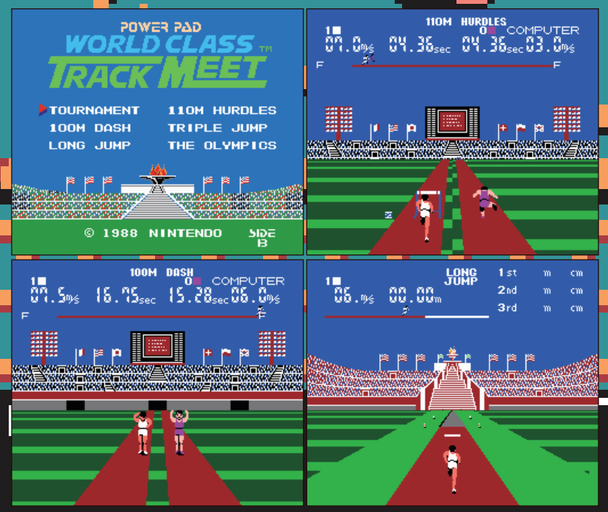


World Class Track Meet

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Sept. 1988
Developer: TRY
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-6 (2 simultaneous)
Special Features: Power Pad (required)
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★⋆

Prepare to run, and jump, and run some more in this third-person perspective, Olympics-style game using the Power Pad accessory. Players can stomp their feet to run and jump and compete in one of four events (100-meter Dash, 110-meter Hurdles, Triple Jump, Long Jump), one at a time or sequentially with the Olympics mode. Players compete one-on-one against increasingly more difficult opponents (with animal names) as players progress. The Tournament mode allows for up to eight human players to enter their names and compete against each other in these rudimentary mini-games. It's almost purely a Family Fun Fitness Pad/Power Pad tech demo, and the experience is about as deep as a puddle. Note: this game was first released as *Stadium Events* by Bandai, but Nintendo purchased the rights from Bandai and had all unsold copies of *Stadium Events* pulled from stores. Besides the different title screens, the games are identical. It may be fun for a moment, but then it's probably forgotten afterwards, much like the Power Pad it came with.

Reflections: This game is entertaining for about three minutes. For most kids, it would be the only Power Pad game they would ever own, as the fun factor and usefulness is extremely limited, as there's only so much you can do with button sensors on a plastic rug. For some strange reason, the six runner opponents you face are all named after animals, from Turtle up to Cheetah. Unfortunately, the characters are all human and are not modeled after their animal heritage. The box that the Power Pad came in featured colorful sock-wearing children breaking a sweat. It also featured the unfortunate Nintendo marketing phrase, "Now you're playing with body power." The less said about that the better. – PC



World Games

Genre: Sports
Release Date: Mar. 1989
Developer: Epyx
Ported by: Software Creations
Publisher: Milton Bradley
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

This series of eight varied mini-game events takes place around the globe and it is up to the player to beat the world records and bring home the gold to their country. From the staple Weight Lifting and Slalom Skiing to the more obscure Caber Toss and Log Rolling, there is a mix of events that is very varied. The events have fun history lessons via text beforehand and unique intro music to set the scene. It is down to the player to figure out how to maneuver the participant. Controls are hit-and-miss as the Cliff Diving feels intuitive but an event like the Barrel Jump is standard D-pad mashing fun. The Bull Riding and Sumo Wrestling, however, seem pure potluck and the Weight Lifting is supremely difficult to pull off. Luckily there is a practice option to work out controls and hone skills but events like the weights, skiing, and log roll really hamper the fun due to their respective difficulty and twitchy controls. A lack of button prompts to assist in the practice sections is a failed opportunity to learn some of the harder events. Each sport has its own graphical style that keeps the visuals fresh, and crashing out during events is humorous in their animations. Shoddy controls and a mix of dull events such as the Caber Toss and Slalom Skiing hamper a game that should have been a fun two-player experience, as it was originally on the Commodore 64.

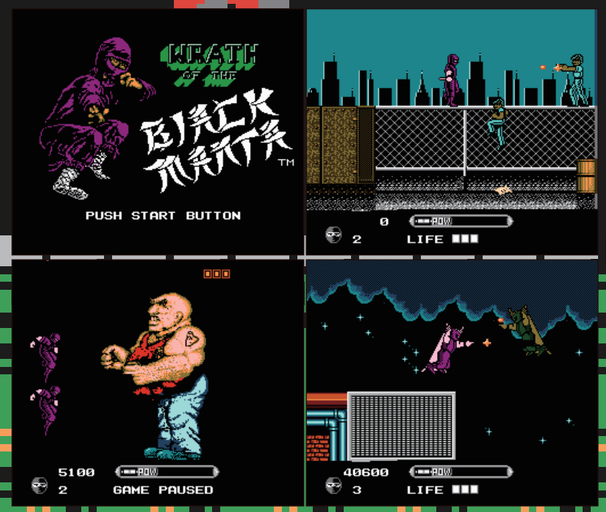
Reflections: What should have been a fun and casual throwaway sports title becomes at times a very frustrating test of patience. The weightlifting is the first event that you come across, which sets the malaise in early, but there is some fun to be had in later ones. The practice mode is a godsend, but if you don't know the controls it really won't matter if you finally pick up the courage to take all eight events on in a row. I stuck to the practice events to replay the sports that I needed to work at as I felt failing along the way in the endurance games marathon would have hindered my fun. I'll give the game some credit in that the animations for the characters are excellent and some events are pure fun to play. Though how on earth you are supposed to jump 15 barrels in the Barrel Jump when I can barely manage five is beyond my sausage link-waggling digits. – JE

Wrath of the Black Manta

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Apr. 1990
Developer: AI
Publisher: Taito
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★⋆

Play as a ninja in this side-scrolling action title as you use your throwing stars, a sword (when close up), and ninja powers to defeat thugs and enemy ninjas of DRAT (Drug Runners and Terrorists). Kidnappings have taken place, and it's up to the player to put a stop to it. To assist you, the Black Manta has access to several powers he can use at any time, such as a flaming projectile attack, fire shield, and the ability to clone yourself to have a ninja assistant. These are selectable before each stage and can be used by charging the power meter with B plus the D-pad. Some are definitely more useful than others, but it at least adds some variety to the proceedings. Enemies are standard and not-too interesting ninjas and gun-toting thugs that can sometimes be interrogated for stage clues. Along the way, you'll be able to duck into rooms, discover secrets and extra health, and rescue kidnapped children. The music and graphics are fine, and the gameplay modes get switched up every once in a while, including a flying/shooter stage and rudimentary third-person action throwing stars at enemies in stationary rooms. There are even rudimentary cutscenes. Any positives, however, are marred by stiff controls and a very slow pace, as well as a higher difficulty than what you'd expect.

Reflections: This is one of those games that I try to enjoy, but each time just have to stop playing since it's soooo run-of-the-mill. It's obviously a game that tried to cash in on the *Ninja Gaiden* craze, but instead decided to try and emulate *Shinobi*. Needless to say, there's a reason why those two series are remembered fondly and this game is not. The captured children that the Black Manta rescues look like either 50-year-old Cabbage Patch Kids or the Chucky doll from *Child's Play*. – PC



Wrecking Crew

Genre: Puzzle, Action
Release Date: Oct. 1985
Developer: Nintendo R&D1
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-2
Special Features: Edit Mode
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

Mario must destroy a set of objects on each of 100 levels with a hammer in this puzzle-action hybrid. Each "phase" in the game is a single vertically scrolling screen with many walls, doors, and ladders which can be destroyed with Mario's hammer, and the phase ends when all are destroyed. Mario cannot jump but can travel vertically via ladders or can drop down from one platforming level to one underneath. He can also walk to end of one side of the screen and appear on the opposite end. Levels are designed in such a manner that many platforms above the player cannot be re-accessed once they are dropped off of, requiring the player to think ahead and plan out the best way to travel through and destroy the objects in a level. It is highly possible for a player to get stuck, so helpfully the game includes an option to go back to the main menu and restart without losing a life via the Select button. Several foes will chase after Mario, including Eggplant Man, a fireball, and walking monkey wrenches. Mario cannot attack them, but has to constantly evade them or destroy bombs on the levels, which will drop the player back down to the bottom of the level if in a tight spot. Spike, an annoying foreman who sometimes appears and will follow Mario along, can also detonate these, but at inopportune times. A simple game, this title has enough unique puzzle action to keep things interesting, at least for a short while. A programmable level edit mode is a diversion, but mostly useless due to the inability of the NES to save them for later play.

Reflections: *Wrecking Crew* was not produced for a long period of time, so it seems like I only ever played the game on a system where the kid was an "early adopter" of the system and had an NES before 1988. So you'd usually have a choice between say this game, *Excitebike*, *Pro Wrestling*, and the like. For reasons such as this, *Wrecking Crew* most likely drew the short straw when it came to being played. This was the first game that Mario starred in post *Donkey Kong* that wasn't a "Mario" titled game. I would count *Golf*, but that game's character always appeared to me as another character entirely, unless that was Mario before his appearance on *Video Game Celebrity Fit Club*. – PC

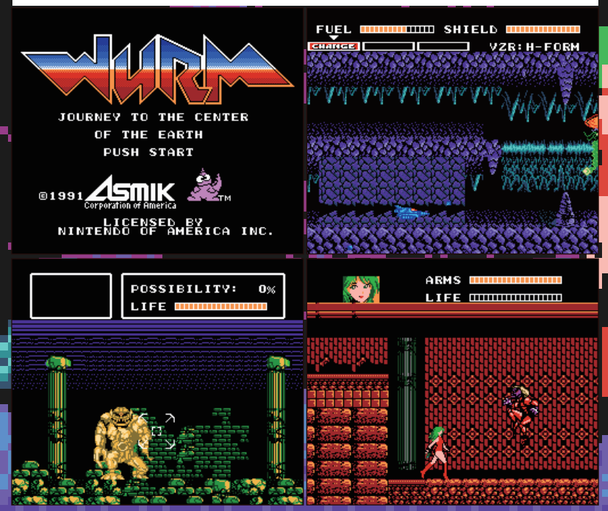
Wurm: Journey to the Center of the Earth

Genre: Shooter, Action
Release Date: Nov. 1991
Developer: Cyclone System
Publisher: Asmik
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★⋆

Players take control of a crew in an underground "Wurm" VRZ digging machine setting out in search of other lost crews in this multi-genre game. Stages rotate between different game types: horizontal shooter, vertical shooter, first-person shooter mode taking on stage bosses, and a side-scrolling action mode where players take control of Moby, a female crew member armed with a pistol and kick. Here, the player must navigate around and find/rescue people while dealing with simple drones. Gameplay isn't great on the shooter stages, which are adequate at best as the player switches between driller and flying mode. The side-scrolling stages are overly simplistic with obtuse mazes comprising the only real challenge. Only the first-person shooter boss modes are interesting; the objective is to talk to the right crew members inside the Wurm for clues to defeat the boss to help build the "Possibility" meter to 100 percent. Once that happens, shooting the monster/robot in the correct spot to defeat them is possible. Graphics are pretty good here, and the music tracks are mostly fine. The game is unique for attempting to string together the different genres, and is held together by a fairly engaging story that is told in well-done cinematic cutscenes.

Reflections: From the looks of it, either part of the game engine for Wurm was derived from *Golgo 13: Top Secret Episode*, or else the developers were heavily inspired by it. The unraveling story, multi-genre design, the similar look to the side-scrolling levels, and the first-person shooting modes all have more than a passing resemblance to that title. The game is even broken up into five "Acts," with the same disappearing font appearance that was used before. Oh, and you discover a robot crew member named G-13, just to hammer the point home.

I know it's drawn in an anime style where sometimes females aren't really given the <ahem> proper attire, but Moby's lack of pants and skimpy attire does not seem to be fitting for underground exploring. I'm sure her fellow male crew members don't mind her wearing that inside the VRZ machine, but they could at least have been gentlemen and offered her some track pants or a sweatshirt for her underground adventures. – PC



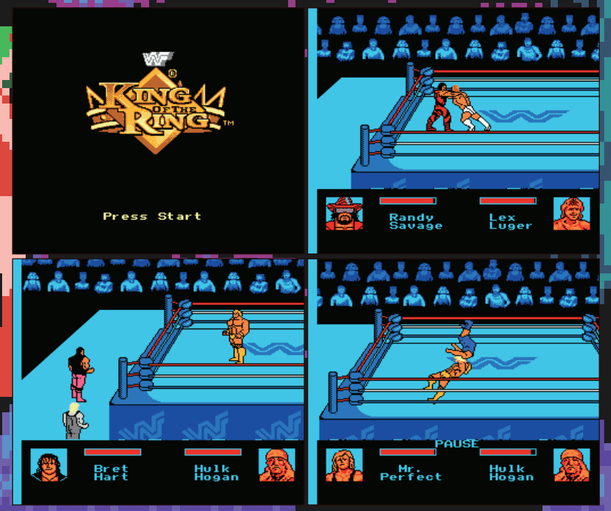
WWF King of the Ring

Genre: Wrestling
Release Date: Nov. 1993
Developer: Eastridge Technology, Gray Matter
Publisher: LJN
Players: 1–2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★⋆

The final WWF game on the NES features 10 wrestlers competing in single matches, tag team mode, a tournament mode where one player must defeat nine others for the WWF championship, or the King of the Ring, an eight-wrestler, single-elimination tournament. The wrestlers in the ring all look somewhat like their real counterparts, except they all share the same overbuffed physique. The wrestlers all have their own skill attributes, differing in strength, stamina, and speed. That's where the differences end. In the ring, wrestlers all share the same moveset: punch, kick, dropkick, elbow drop, stomp, and four lockup grapple moves: head butt, throw, body slam, and suplex. Controls are responsive, though, and the lockup system works well enough, even if it amounts to button mashing to gain control. The most impressive aspect of the game could be the rudimentary create-a-wrestler where, after selecting the "You" wrestler, it allows the player to name them and then used limited skill points to assign to the strength, stamina, and speed attributes. After winning matches, more skill points are awarded to the player. There's a solid foundation here, with better than average graphics, sound effects, and controls, which is why it's a shame that there are limited options, and no individually unique wrestling moves. The WWF NES games don't go out with a big slam here, but with an "eh."

Reflections: The steroidal physiques of the wrestlers is beyond cartoonish, featuring massive chests and arms but four-year-old skinny legs. I'm loving the somewhat large roster here (Hulk Hogan manages to be the only wrestler to make it into all four WWF games), but the skill attributes are a little inaccurate and almost random. Really, Razor Ramon is one of the fastest wrestlers?

Unfortunately, the string of mediocre WWF games would continue for some time on the SNES with *WWF WrestleMania*, *WWF Royal Rumble*, and *WWF Raw* (the latter two at least added special moves). It wouldn't be until *WWF No Mercy* on the N64 system that WWF fans would finally be granted a game completely worthy of their time. – PC



WWF WrestleMania

Genre: Wrestling
Release Date: Jan. 1989
Developer: Rare
Publisher: Acclaim Entertainment
Players: 1-6 (2 simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Common
★⋆

Choose from one of six top stars from the late '80s in the first WWF (World Wrestling Federation) console video game. The chip renditions of the various wrestlers' themes are great and the graphics are solid, with each wrestler easily decipherable and a good rendition of their real life counterpart. There's even a six-player tournament mode. Sadly, the game is incredibly unfun to play and the controls are poorly thought through. Some wrestlers have turnbuckle moves but only from the bottom two, and others don't have any at all. Some can bodyslam, others can't, and one wrestler (Andre the Giant) can only be slammed by one specific opponent (Hulk Hogan). Pins are humorously difficult to perform. By not making a universal control scheme and adapting wrestlers to it, the game loses any "pick up and play" value by making what was learned for one wrestler likely unusable for another. It results in matches with mostly uninteresting button-mashing of punches/kicks with little strategy. The addition of wrestler-specific health power-ups that can be grabbed at the top of the ring as they float by seems more perfunctory than anything else, and the dark void around the ring doesn't even make the game interesting to look at. A major disappointment during one of wrestling's more popular periods.

Reflections: Oh, the amount of time I spent on this game. A neighborhood kid had this title and it was all he ever wanted to play. He didn't know how but insisted it was great based on its license. Many afternoons were wasted aimlessly smashing buttons. My favorite aspects of the game, then and today, are the music and restoring life with pizza, crucifixes, and other wrestler-specific icons that bounce along the apron in a very comic way. – IF

As a giant WWF fan as a kid, I was all but crushed when this game was released. As much as *Nintendo Power* tried to pimp this game out, I could even tell from the magazine spread that we were in trouble. I don't remember if I even ever rented this one, but a few friends had it and I remembered nothing but misery. All we needed was *Pro Wrestling* with WWF wrestler heads pasted on. How hard is that, Rare? – PC

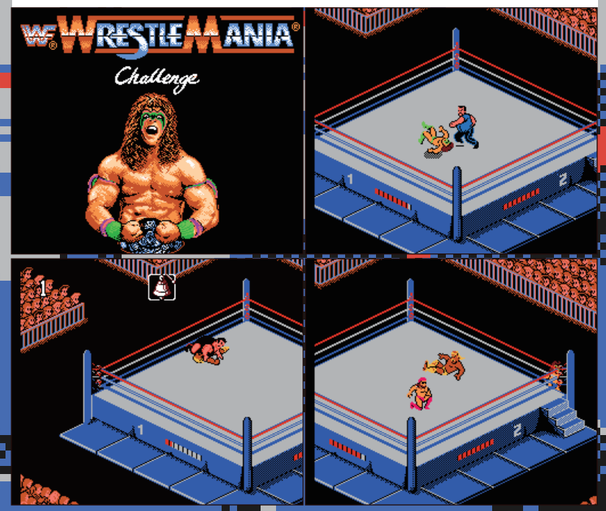
WWF WrestleMania Challenge

Genre: Wrestling
Release Date: Nov. 1990
Developer: Rare
Publisher: LJN
Players: 1–2 (Simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★

The second WWF game on the NES, this title features several different modes that can be experienced inside the ring: one-on-one (where the player takes control of the generic "You" wrestler who must defeat all the other real WWF stars), tag team mode, and a three-on-three Survivor Series style match. In two-player versus mode, the same options are available for single-match mode, but there is also a nifty two-player co-op mode where you can team up with a friend to go after the Tag Team titles. The presentation here is fantastic, as all of the nine individual WWF wrestlers are drawn well and look like their real-life counterparts, and almost every wrestler's theme is authentic and sounds great. Each wrestler even has a limited unique moveset of a handful of moves. However, the subpar controls may prevent you from fully being able to replicate them consistently. Moves are initiated not by a lock-up grapple system but by simply getting close to an opponent and either tapping or pressing the B or A button, which will initiate either a weak or powerful strike or an attempt to grab the opponent to body slam them or perform another maneuver. A "Power Strike" can also be attempted by pressing B + A simultaneously. While turnbuckle moves are present, there are no running attacks. Also complicating matters is the isometric ring perspective that results in moving in awkward diagonals when pressing one of the four main directions on the D-pad. If one can conquer the controls long enough to play the game competently, there is still the high degree of difficulty to contend with, especially when facing someone like Andre the Giant.

Reflections: The controls are very frustrating – why not map the diagonal movement to the diagonals of the D-pad so I don't have to guess which direction my wrestler is going to move when I play? I guess you could attempt to turn the control pad on an angle to match the directions, but do you think eight-year-olds would have thought of that? Okay, maybe some would have.

I'm also a little insulted that when I play as "Me," my special move is a simple drop kick. What?! Don't you realize that I trained in the wrestling "dungeon" up in Calgary with the legendary Stu Hart?! He taught me the deadly Cross-legged McChicken Buster! Rare: code it in, pronto! – PC



WWF WrestleMania: Steel Cage Challenge

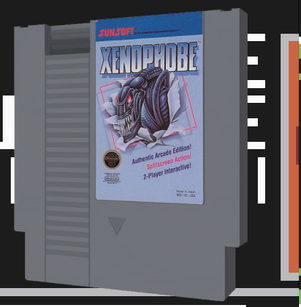
Genre: Wrestling
Release Date: Sept. 1992
Developer: Sculptured Software
Publisher: LJN
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★⋆

The third WWF wrestling game takes a step back in this disappointing outing. Single one-on-one and tag team wrestling modes are present, as well as WWF Championship and Tag Team Championship modes where the player must defeat all the other 10 selectable wrestlers, such as the Undertaker, the Mountie, and Roddy Piper. Action in the ring is slow, plodding, and uninspiring. Although a grappling system happily exists (mashing buttons gains control), all the wrestlers share the same limited moveset: punch, kick, body slam, headbutt, throw, and a handful of other boring running, turnbuckle, and ground attacks (stomp, elbow drop). Presentation is very inadequate, as there is no music during the matches (although it exists during the wrestler selection), sound effects are limited to ho-hum crowd noises and grunts, and the sloppy character graphics are so undefined that wrestlers can barely be distinguished by their clothing. And the titular "Steel Cage Challenge"? That simply is underwhelming as well – it amounts to slowly climbing to the top of the cage by pressing UP repeatedly when the opponent is down. However, if the wrestler cannot reach the top before fallen foe stands back up, the wrestler on the cage will fall down to the apron for no reason. It's weak, which fits right in with the rest of the game.

Reflections: This title seems to utilize a very similar game engine as the SNES release *WWF Super Wrestlemania*. That game also has muddled graphics and similar animations of the same wrestling moves (which, by the way, all the wrestlers shared). There's something so very disappointing about a wrestling game which does so very little to distinguish its wrestlers from one another. No finishing or signature moves? No different moves at all? Why bother having wrestlers based on their real life counterparts at all then? It's somehow even more depressing versus if they hadn't even tried at all. – PC

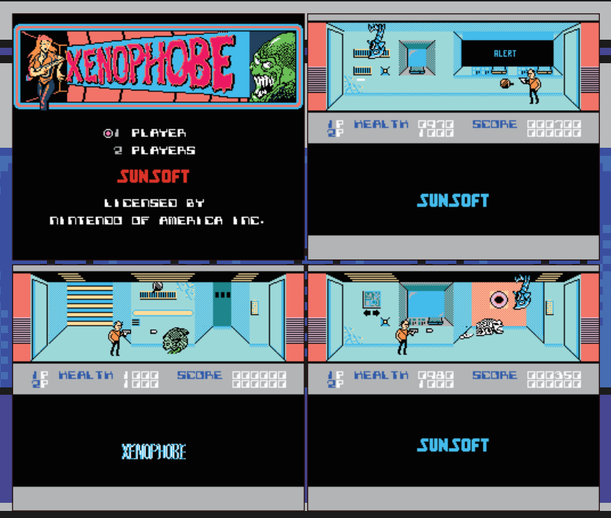
Xenophobe

Genre: Run and Gun Shooter
Release Date: Dec. 1988
Developer: Bally Midway
Ported by: Sunsoft
Publisher: Sunsoft
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★⋆



This is a side-view action-arcade game where the player is tasked with ridding eight space stations/moon bases of an unspecified number of H. R. Giger-inspired aliens and security lasers before the timer expires. Should a second player join, they play in the lower half of the horizontally split screen. Three characters are available to choose from, but other than appearance, they're all the same and begin the game with a standard gun. Upgrades can be collected as defeated enemies randomly drop loot including faster lasers, health pickups, and point bonuses; the guns revert back to basic at the start of a new board, but health remains the same. The player can jump, crouch (with an awkward button combination instead of just pressing down), and be knocked over when aliens attack, which is briefly immobilizing. Elevator buttons and door releases can be pressed on walls to open up more screens, but these really aren't necessary because the stages can be completed without even shooting - the player just doesn't get a bonus score. The game only ends when the health number hits zero, but each playthrough can be prolonged by trying to avoid enemies rather than kill them. Poor controls marred with bad graphical clipping and lumbered with lackluster presentation result in a title that is not worth the time.

Reflections: Sunsoft had a fairly decent reputation when it came to NES games, but this arcade rework is just plain sloppy. The gameplay doesn't change from the opening screen; it just rinses and repeats the same ripped-off monsters that even the box art suggests are stolen straight from the popular horror film *Aliens*. The larger enemies do damage frequently and always catch you when you try to jump over them. It soon becomes a war of attrition because the standard gun is rubbish, and power-ups seldom appear. It's a shame each character is identical apart from one inexplicably looking like a duck, as there is scope to having different abilities or stats. As it stands, the game is barely playable and pales in comparison to its bigger brother in the arcade. When Ripley kills herself at the end of *Alien 3*, it wasn't an alien in her chest that burst out - it was a copy of this title. – JE



Xevious

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Sept. 1988
Developer: Namco
Publisher: Bandai
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

Namco's simple but fun vertically scrolling shooter gets a quality port to the NES. Players will pilot the Solvalou fighter ship over a changing landscape to complete all 16 sections, which then loop back to section seven with increased difficulty. The game is simplistic in terms of weaponry, as there are only forward-firing cannons for air enemies and bombs for ground targets. Mastering the use of the bombs, which must be precisely aimed using a reticule that constantly hovers at a fixed distance ahead of your ship, is key for racking up decent scores. The enemies are basic-appearing as well, largely consisting of saucers, invincible floating walls, and gray attack ships, but each has a specific and unique pattern that make things much more interesting when they all come together. One cool touch is the inclusion of the Andor Genesis, often considered one of the first level bosses in video games, which is a large saucer that can be destroyed by attacking the core for big points. There are also some neat hidden secrets in the forms of flags that can be exposed for points by bombing specific segments of the land, turning your brief free moments into a scavenger hunt. Despite the basic nature and grating sound effects, the title is definitely enjoyable for fans of early arcade shooters but tighter, better-designed titles evolved from this template shortly after.

Reflections: As the resident Namco fanboy wherever I go, I adore this game and have absorbed far too much of its mythology. It's as simple as it is important. The scrolling landscape, which was quite detailed at the time, can't be overlooked for adding a real sense of journey to the scrolling shooter. At the same time, shooting aggressive pie tins does wear thin, and other great pick up and play shooters like *Star Soldier* scratch the same itch as *Xevious*. – IF

Originally I was going to write this review, but Ian begged and pleaded to let him do it instead. I hope you appreciate the extra nuances and insight he added for this very complex game. – PC

Xexyz

Genre: Action, Shooter
Release Date: Apr. 1990
Developer: Atlus
Publisher: Hudson Soft
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⋆

Divided into platforming and side-scrolling shooter levels, this oddly titled, post-apocalyptic (circa 2777) game puts players in the role of Apollo. Apollo uses his space battle suit to confront the forces of evil on Earth's five remaining islands, each of which is colorful and somewhat detailed, but fairly nondescript: Ruins, Forest, Crystals, Lakes, and Volcano. The platforming areas have dead ends (lame) and have the player face off against mechanical monsters and androids using weapons such as hand beams, typhoons, wave balls (which go through walls and objects), 45B balls (which bounce off objects at angles), and other purchasable weapons. Many doors are available to go into to receive clues, shop, and receive power-ups. Collecting "E" blocks gives you currency (useful in shops for weapon upgrades or life replenishment) while grabbing "L" blocks refills your life bar. The airborne scenes (after acquiring different types of craft) offer typical shooter action with branching pathways. Players have a standard shot here as well as a bomb for ground attacks, with "S" blocks providing a speed-up and "P" to power up the gun. Here you'll face a nice enemy stage boss. The controls for the game feel good in your hands, and the graphics are pleasant and cartoony if not outstanding. Backgrounds in particular pop out, and the soundtrack is pretty good.

Reflections: It seems like every time I rummage through a box of NES carts at a convention, flea market, or other place selling second-hand video games, I find a copy of *Xexyz* (sometimes complete, or at least with the manual), a cartridge that is all over the map in terms of how people pronounce it. The game is also all over the map regarding character graphics, theme, and play action: an odd concoction of fantasy and science fiction, and of platforming and shooting. *Xexyz*, which reminds me a little of *Air Fortress* (NES) and *Keith Courage in Alpha Zones* (TurboGrafx-16), is pronounced "Zex-ease." – PC

Yo! Noid

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Nov. 1990
Developer: Now Production
Publisher: Capcom
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★

The player takes on the persona of the Domino's Pizza Noid mascot who must battle and save New York City from the minions of his evil duplicate Mr. Green. The Noid is equipped with a yoyo to attack the enemies that are encountered. Three different types of magic spells can be utilized by collecting their icon and scrolls to fill a meter throughout each stage. B + DOWN will unleash magic; two types take out enemies and a third speeds up the Noid and has him jump higher. The stages and villains are very varied, ranging from Central Park, the Bronx, a wharf, to a circus. There are even a few stages employing vehicles: a skateboard, a gyrocopter, and the Noid's "Pizza Crusher." Music is good and graphics are very nice for both the characters and the backgrounds, with lots of detail, good color selection, and crisp movement animations. The stage bosses are disappointing, consisting of a simplistic numeric card game against an enemy Noid to see who can eat the most pizzas. The game is mostly fun to play, with the exception of the crushing difficulty. The player dies on a single enemy touch which will put them back at the beginning of each stage, which can be tough, especially with stage hazards such as pits and falling rocks thrown in. Even though extra lives and continues can be earned in the game, there are many spots in the game that require absolute perfect playing in order to get through, which will frustrate even the most hardened 8-bit gamer.

Reflections: This was translated from a Famicom title, *Kamen no Ninja Hanamaru*, which likely had nothing to do with pizza. It is strange that the Noid in this game is heroic, since in the commercials he was a villain trying to steal pizzas and harass delivery boys and the like. It's mind-boggling that he was never officially arrested and brought up on charges, now that I think about it. – PC

Yoshi

***Mario & Yoshi** (PAL)*
Genre: Puzzle
Release Date: June 1992
Developer: Game Freak
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★⋆

This puzzle game, devoid of nearly any strategy, was seemingly created to take advantage of the new mascot's popularity. Popular enemies from the Mario universe, such as Goombas and Boos, fall in pairs into a bin four columns wide. Players can move Mario on the bottom and use his hands to swap adjacent tray columns as they attempt to match the topmost enemy with the same type, causing the matching pair to disappear. The game ends if the enemies stack higher than the top line. Yoshi comes into play as bottom and top halves of his egg will occasionally take the place of an enemy in a falling pair. Completing a Yoshi egg scores bonus points and sandwiching a bunch of enemies between the two halves scores more points and hatches a bigger Yoshi, eliminating all the enemies in between. The biggest problem here is that the game doesn't ever feel exciting. There are no combos to set up nor overly clever ways to arrange pieces based on what piece is up next. If the player has even a hint of skill, then the entire game comes down to luck of the piece drops. Options such as speed of falling enemies and starting level may be chosen before play. Game mode A has the player match pairs until they lose, and mode B tasks the player to clear the screen to move on to the next stage. However, most will not want to bother exploring the options since the puzzle action is too dull.

Reflections: When Nintendo debuted Yoshi in *Super Mario World* on the SNES, every fan of the series wanted more of the green dinosaur/dragon, and those of us that only had an NES wanted any at all. Unfortunately, the response to this was to churn out a couple of nonsense "puzzle" games they could slap a sprite of the character into and send them out to stores for the unsuspecting to purchase. I remember this as being one of the first times I ever felt like Nintendo was simply "cashing in." – IF

Yoshi's Cookie

Genre: Puzzle
Release Date: Apr. 1993
Developer: Bullet-Proof Software
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★⋆

The player takes control of Mario in a bakery in this well-polished but dull puzzle game. In a square bin, tiles of different cookie symbols must be all matched to the same symbol in an individual row or column to eliminate that row/column of tiles. This is accomplished by the player moving a cursor to freely rotate the tiles in a row or column until the same tile type lines up in a row or column. Yoshi cookies show up from time to time and act as wild cards. The round clears when all tiles are eliminated. More cookie tiles will be added from the top or side as time goes on, so the player has to act quickly before too many cookie tiles fill the screen and end the game when the bin fills. The issue is that there is not really true puzzle strategy involved. Success relies on fast action to eliminate single rows/columns faster than the new tiles can be added, and combos seem to happen by accident. There is a way to work out multiple column/row eliminations at once, but that seems more like stumbling upon them than working towards that goal. Any pausing to try and work out any sort of strategy is unnecessary and counterproductive, due to the freedom the player has moving the tiles and the ease in which it can be done. It seems almost like there is a gameplay element missing here, as it's too simple and has almost nothing to do with puzzle-solving.

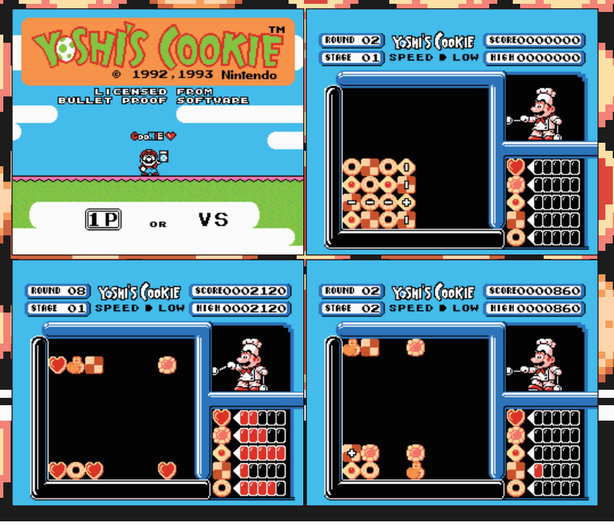
Reflections: Rushed development time? Cheap cash-in on the Yoshi name? Who knows, but this is a title that is puzzling in how it reflects almost nothing of the puzzle genre of games. When I would combo-eliminate rows/columns, it wasn't by any grand design, but by accident. I'm sure some hardcore *Yoshi's Cookie* fan out there will try and convince me that "Hey! There's really strategy involved here, really!" but I'm not buying it. It's like a Mahjong game where you can pick up the tiles and move them to wherever you'd like. – PC

The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Dec. 1992
Developer: Jaleco
Publisher: Jaleco
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★★⋆

Players take control of a young Indiana Jones on adventures during the Mexican Revolution and World War I. Players traverse different landscapes such as the Mexican desert, a train, and a German fortress both horizontally and vertically while dispatching enemy shooters, grenade throwers, animals, turrets, tanks, etc. Armed by default with his trusty whip, Indy will come across crates that contain various items such as gold and relics (which can earn extra lives), limited invincibility, torches/flashlights to lighten dark levels, and several different projectile weapons like guns, grenades, and a throwing knife. Only one weapon can be held at a time so it's up to the player to decide which ones to keep. However, the grenade will be given to the player to take out some of the interesting and difficult bosses encountered – all of which have to be conquered differently. The platforming can be precarious, as the player must avoid traps and pitfalls, all while getting past the enemies, of which none should be taken lightly. The player has only a maximum of three hit points before death, with the second to last stripping the player of their weapon, leaving them with a hard-to-utilize punch. The difficulty is very high, but the opportunity to garner extra lives and the five provided continues makes the challenge fair. A later NES release, the graphics/animation are of a very high quality, and the backgrounds of the well-designed levels are nice to play against. This very polished title is capped off with good music, nice cutscenes framing the story, and even a shooter stage where the player can face the Red Baron himself!

Reflections: Somehow this NES Indiana Jones title got it right! While the games based upon the second and third films weren't spectacular, ironically the one based upon the much lesser-known television show got the job done. When Indy has the whip in the game, it resembles *Castlevania* a little, which almost makes me wish the game had the whip as the primary weapon throughout, with the throwing weapons and guns being there only as a limited secondary attack. Of course, this would require redesigning the levels and boss battles, but it'd probably be the definitive console Indy game. And of course, I'd throw in the ability to swing with the whip. Alright, alright, so maybe I'm just telling you to go play *Super Castlevania* on the SNES instead. – PC



Zanac

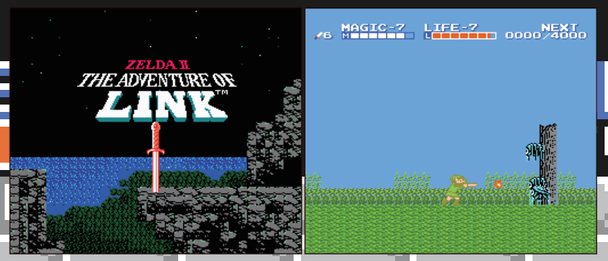
Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Oct. 1987
Developer: Compile
Publisher: FCI
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⯪

In this overhead vertical shooter, the player commands the Zanac ship while plowing through ground and air enemies over 12 areas consisting of planets, space stations, and outer space stages. The Zanac ship has a primary laser weapon which can be powered up (double, triple, super fire) by collecting yellow orbs from floating blue boxes. Numbered boxes containing one of eight secondary weapons can be attained by collecting them from ground targets. The default is controlled directional fire (activated with A), and the eight others include projectile weapons, defensive/offensive shields, and bombs. Selecting which secondary weapon to use will largely depend on each individual's playing style, but the player should be mindful of accidentally grabbing another numbered box by accident and changing it. Graphics and music are both solid. The scrolling playfield effect is excellent and really adds to the feeling of mayhem with the constant stream of enemies and their attacks (all with no gameplay slowdown). At the end of each stage the player will take on a fortress; if defeated in the given time limit, the game's difficulty will decrease. The shortcomings lie in the uninteresting design of the enemies and the challenge, which by default is very high. If the player's ship is fully powered and utilizing a preferred secondary weapon, they stand a chance, but once a life is lost, it's tough to survive long enough to repower the ship again before all remaining lives are gone (especially at fortresses). Players may utilize continues up to level ten, but the difficulty imbalance may be too daunting for some. However, hardcore shooter fans should have a much better time.

Reflections: Yeah, I know, shooters are supposed to be difficult, but do they really have to be so much so that you might as well reset the game if you lose one life? Is this due to the Automativ Level of Difficulty Control (ALC) which is supposed to change enemy strength and quantity (according to the manual)? Come on, let's negotiate this. Can you start us off at least somewhat powered after getting killed, to give us a fighting chance later on? Some griping aside, *Zanac* did a lot of things right, especially for an earlier shooter. – PC

Zelda II: The Adventure of Link

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: Dec. 1988
Developer: Nintendo R&D4
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★★⯪



Link must prevent Gannon's resurrection and retrieve the Triforce of Courage by traversing maze-like, side-scrolling palaces to place six crystals in statues, all while killing off various guardians and monsters using his sword. The overworld is navigated via a top-down map while villages, random encounters, and dungeons are viewed from the side and often incorporate platforming elements. Random encounters are handled interestingly. Shadows of enemies will appear on screen and sometimes a fairy. Collision with a shadow will either throw you into a harder or easier encounter with several enemies while a fairy will restore your life. Enemies within the palaces and throughout the world of Hyrule are designed fantastically with fierce-looking Moblins (goblin-like enemies), armored dingos, red devils, axe-throwing alligator men, and creative bosses like horse-headed knights and multi-headed dragons. Fighting these enemies is fun despite the simplicity, as Link can attack high or low with his sword, but some enemies have the ability to block attacks. Link also carries a shield, which can stop small projectiles and block slashes of some enemies' swords and spears. At full health, Link's sword can shoot a magic blade a short distance. Unfortunately, that blade only affects the weakest enemies and quickly becomes useless.

Link can gather experience from killing certain enemies during the dungeon and overworld encounters which allows him to upgrade his attack strength, life, and magic. The latter two upgrades cause less health and magic to be depleted when Link takes damage or casts a spell. Additionally, the player can find large Heart Containers and Magic Containers that serve to extend the player's life and magic bars. Spells are learned by finding wise men hiding in certain towns, which also serve as places to gather info. Basic spells like Jump are fairly self explanatory, whereas more interesting ones like Fairy can allow Link to fly through hazard-filled rooms without problem or even pass through locked doors via the keyhole. Link will also gain access to two additional moves beyond his sword stab: an upward jumping thrust and a downward jumping stab which, while simple, allow for more strategic attacking options. These can also be found in villages by finding hard-to-reach great swordsmen. The music is fantastic and exploring the palaces is fun and full of mystery, and the game has a number of fun secrets to find. Each palace has certain items hidden in them that are necessary to progress in the game. Candles that light dark caves, gloves that can break certain block types, and water boots that allow Link to traverse certain parts of ocean are but a few of these. Later palaces become much more challenging and full of puzzles involving bottomless pits and fake walls.

The game does have some fairly insane difficulty spikes peppered throughout it. One example fairly early on is a mind-numbingly complex maze of caverns Link must travel into to get a hammer that is needed to break boulders blocking the roads. This section is full of extremely powerful enemies and the unfortunately forced inclusion of lives can make these segments more frustrating than they should be. This does create a nicely tense environment, and the game is exceptionally rewarding when these areas are cleared, so it's a bit of a double-edged sword. The lead up to Death Mountain and the final palace will require grinding for leveling up and lives as well, yet the scope and challenge of that final area is enormously fun. Regardless of some of these questionable design choices, this is still a wonderfully fun and deep game and is absolutely worth a player's time – a great choice for a rainy afternoon or to conquer the winter doldrums.

Reflections: My parents played video games quite a bit during the NES era. It was a boon to my younger brother and me who could usually only expect a game at Christmas and maybe on our birthdays. *Zelda II* was never actually mine but a birthday gift from my mom to my dad. So while I generally had to wait much longer to get a turn in, it still felt like a "free game" and a definite bonus. I really enjoyed watching my parents play this one – I loved the mood and the way Hyrule was portrayed in this title. A black binder sat next to the TV in the months following the game's purchase, full of my mom's hand-drawn maps to accompany my dad's travels. This is a popular title in *Zelda* series of games to hate and while it has some glaring faults, it is, in my opinion, a far more imaginative and sprawling title than the original. It may be very different in style than *The Legend of Zelda*, but that's only really an issue in retrospect, as many direct NES sequels played differently. – IF

In the past years, it has become "trendy" to say that *Zelda II* and *Super Mario Bros. 2* are not good games. This is, of course, ludicrous. No one in their right mind thought these were bad games when they were released, and it's entitled people now only weakly arguing such just because the games don't "fit" what THEY think the franchise's game universe should be like.

Zelda II was advertised way back in the *Nintendo Fun Club* newsletter as "coming soon." It didn't get released until a long while later, and even then, it was nearly impossible to find in stores. Nintendo claimed this was due to "chip shortages," but it could have been them just controlling the supply and crushing a child's soul in the process. My parents had ordered it for Christmas of 1988 from the Sears Catalog. Not only did it not arrive in time for Christmas, but it did not arrive until APRIL OF THE FOLLOWING YEAR. I would excitedly run to the door every single day after school whenever I heard the UPS truck rumble by in the neighborhood, only to be disappointed when it did not stop at my house. By late February, every time I would see the UPS truck drive by and not stop, I would burst into tears. By April, I wasn't even expecting the game to arrive anymore, so when it finally did it somehow transformed my battered emotions into surprise and happiness again. – PC

Zen: Intergalactic Ninja

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: Mar. 1993
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Konami
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Uncommon
★★★⯪

Environmentalism takes center stage in this multi-mode action game based on the cartoon. The player controls Zen, a blue ninja tasked to take down Lord Contaminous and his minions with a bo staff that is used for melee attacks. Four stages are available from the start: Forest, Oil Rig, Railway, and Toxic Factory. The isometric railway stage has the player traveling in a mine cart while using the bo to take out enemies and having to watch directional arrows to hit switches and make quick jumps over rocks and pits, culminating in a boss battle on foot. The isometric Toxic Factory stage is timed and has the player using the bo to take out robots while doing some precarious platforming on conveyor belts and over pits. The Forest stage is an interesting boss battle which has the player having to time-manage between attacking the boss on the top of the stage versus dropping down to swipe the flowers below to protect them from the acid rain, as letting all the flowers wither will result in a loss of a life. The Oil Rig is a more standard side-scrolling platformer, complete with hand-walking and climbing stairs. Here, the player must collect fire extinguishers and use them to rescue trapped firemen. Item pick-ups in stages include only a shield and a "meditation" full health restoration that can be stored and used with SELECT. A nice bonus stage to knock garbage into a furnace gives the player a chance to earn extra lives, shields, increase maximum health, and more meditation pick-ups. A few varied stages take place after the main four, including an interesting falling stage inside a cave, and one where Zen must face a clone of himself. The graphics are excellent, the music good, and the controls are top-notch. However, the level of difficulty is extremely high, and the player is not given an opportunity to learn and/or build upon their experience in order to succeed from one stage to the next. Thus, the game conveys a very disjointed experience as the player is thrown into danger right away with no build up, even though the varied stage types are inventive. Still, it's a very polished title, and is worth checking out for some pro-environmental action.

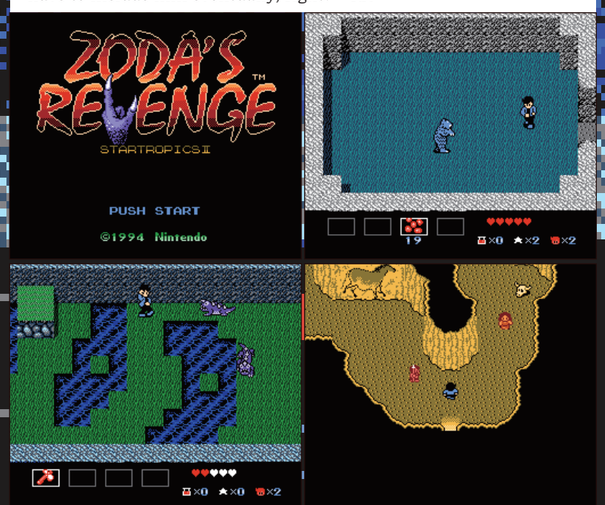
Reflections: Zen was popular in the early '90s for about a minute and a half. There was a cartoon and a toy line that was even released. This is the sort of game that you pop in and are wowed by since it looks impressive, but then you quickly regret it since you're beaten down by the insane difficulty right off the bat. – PC

Zoda's Revenge: StarTropics II

Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: Mar. 1994
Developer: Nintendo R&D3
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: Common
★★★⯪

This sequel continues where its predecessor ended. The story begins when Mike and his archaeologist uncle translate a book, which causes Mike to time travel to the past! Mike must find a way home while stopping an evil plan. The main overworld is top-down and characters are in RPG-like "chibi" style, only moving horizontally and vertically. Players start with rocks but can find other weapons like a dagger, katana, slingshot, and more. You can enter doors or fall into hidden holes on the overhead view to reach dungeons, which are detailed in normal proportion in overhead view, sometimes with tiered platform levels, adding depth. Here Mike can move diagonally and change direction mid-jump. This is challenging (especially if you're accustomed to the first game's different controls) since you must line up perfectly to make jumps and shots with your weapons while you're able to face so many directions. Bears, fire-spitting ducks, dinosaurs, and other monsters try to shoot or ram you, often requiring multiple hits to defeat. You can upgrade weapons, get telekinetic powers, and get items to replenish health, but it's easy for enemies to drain them quickly since recovery between hits is brief. Platforming will probably kill you most often, since jumps can be challenging and falls mean instant death. Jumping on special tiles set into the ground is an integral aspect of the game. These tiles are not only platforms, but can hide switches that reveal items and doors so you can progress. Despite the difficulty, there's fun to be had. The story starts with little explanation, so players discover things with Mike along the journey. You visit varied locations with individual music (like the Old West "Cactus Dance") and meet historical celebrities. Need Cleopatra's help? Deliver her a pizza. From where? Caesar's Hut. If you missed this game, you may want to make up for lost time.

Reflections: I've never understood why *StarTropics* and Mike have been forgotten by so many gamers and Nintendo. He's a teenager and hits people with yo-yos and baseball bats. How is it that R.O.B., the Wii Fit Trainer, and Mr. Game & Watch are acceptable as fighters in Super Smash Bros. games but Mike isn't? It could be because the world of *StarTropics* is *our* world (to an extent), too close to reality to fit Nintendo's focus on escaping it. It's where cola, submarines, and denim jackets exist. It's not Hyrule, Corneria, Mushroom Kingdom, or any other fantasy zone. I do hope that one day Nintendo will blow the dust off the property and use its latent potential for a new game. At the very least, we can hope that Mike will appear in *Super Smash Bros.* If they keep on making those games forever, they're going to have to include him eventually, right? – KN



Zombie Nation

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: Sept. 1991
Developer: KAZe
Publisher: Meldac
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★★

Players take control of a floating, giant, disembodied samurai head (!) out to save a zombie-fied USA in this strange horizontal shooter. Players take control of Namakubi who can take out enemies and destroy buildings by firing/spitting projectiles from Namakubi's eyes/mouth. Gameplay is fast and furious, with constant action as the player must take out and avoid foes such as jets, tanks, soldiers, robots, etc., while also destroying structures in the player's path. Power-ups can be gained by rescuing "zombie hostages" that are flung through the air, and health can be replenished via a point structure. Technically impressive with very nice graphics, huge boss characters, energetic music, and smooth controls, the difficulty is what hampers this title the most. While projectiles and enemies touching the player takes off a moderate amount of damage, each stage is filled with columns of lightning, fire, energy, etc., that if the player touches, will reduce Namakubi to a one-hit death after that point. The player is only given a single life per game, but thankfully there are several continues available to give the player at least somewhat of a chance in this weird, action-packed shooter.

Reflections: And so we come to the alphabetic end of the NES library, and what a game to end it with. Certainly an original, *Zombie Nation* is a title with a cult-like following, and not because it has anything really to do with zombies either, outside of the strange cover art. So the gist of the story is that Darc Seed, who is commandeering the alien/zombie takeover, has used a samurai sword named Shura, and that pisses Namakubi off enough to actually get off his nonexistent butt to help save the day. This game didn't sell well, and I don't recall *Nintendo Power* magazine giving it much promotion, probably due to its bizarre plot and appearance.

Are you still with me? Great! Time for the next review! – PC

PAL Exclusive NES Releases

The PAL exclusive NES game releases were those licensed titles released only in the PAL-standard regions of the world, which included European countries. PAL NES systems run slower than NTSC North American systems to conform to the different television standard and frame rate, at only 50 frames per second instead of 60, resulting in game speed that is slower by about 16.7 percent. There were two NES PAL regions: PAL A and PAL B. The PAL A region consisted mainly of Australia, the UK, and Italy. The PAL B region consisted of most other parts of Europe not in PAL A: Germany, France, Spain, and Scandinavian countries. While many games were released in all territories, there were some that were released in only one particular area, for example *Mr. Gimmick*, which was released only in Scandinavia. The following reviews include those titles that were never released in North America. The sole exception is *Rainbow Islands*, which while released stateside, is an entirely different version than the NTSC release. Those games that had minor graphical alterations and/or a title change, such as *Shadow Warriors* (*Ninja Gaiden*) and *Teenage Mutant Hero Turtles* (*Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*), are omitted here.

Aladdin

Genre: Platformer
Release Date: 1994
Developer: Virgin Interactive
Ported by: NMS Software
Publisher: Virgin Interactive
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: N/R
★★

Run, jump, and shimmy around the streets and dungeons of Agrabah as Aladdin on his quest to rescue Princess Jasmine from the evil clutches of Jafar in this adapted version of the Disney movie. Really well-animated sprites and recognizable film music are let down by floaty controls and repetitive stages. It doesn't share that "Capcom feeling" that other Disney titles had on the NES. – JE

Asterix

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: 1993
Developer: Bit Managers
Publisher: Infogrames
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: N/R
★★★

Rescue kidnapped fellow Gaul Obelix before Caesar throws him to the lions in this action-packed platformer. Help our wing-hatted hero jump and punch his way across Europe and the Middle East battling Romans, birds, barrel-lobbing monkeys, and even Caesar's own gladiators on a colorful quest with a true to the comic book feel. – JE

Aussie Rules Footy

Genre: Sports
Release Date: 1991
Developer: Beam Software
Publisher: Laser Beam Entertainment
Players: 1-6 (2 simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: N/R
★★★

Play against 17 other teams in an exhibition match or full season in this Australian football sports simulation. Depending on which team has the ball, the controls change to offense and defense, with the winner being the team who has scored the most goals. Kicking the ball to score awards more points but there is always a chance of it being intercepted. Well-animated characters and simple gameplay make this a fun take on Australia's favorite sport. – JE

Banana Prince

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: 1991
Developer: KID
Publisher: Takara
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: N/R
★★★⋆

This side-scroller stars Banana Prince, the hero who must return the island's stolen weapons. Battle a whole assortment of weird and strange enemies while collecting rings which are used in vending machines strewn across the land. Prince has the unique ability to grow a flower from seeds to give him extra height in reaching treasure chests and clearing very wide gaps. Buy new weapons and even gamble in this quirky slash-and-run title. – JE

Beauty and the Beast

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: 1994
Developer: Probe Software
Publisher: Hudson Soft
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: N/R
★★★

Follow Beast in more run-and-jump Disney action in his mission to save Belle from the nasty Gaston. Punch spiders, bats, rats, and other assorted creatures while avoiding a whole host of environment traps. Other characters come to Beast's aid, such as Lumière the candle who lights the way through dark passages. Awkward vertical scrolling occasionally jarrs the visuals, but this is yet another fun Disney platformer. – JE

Championship Rally

Genre: Racing
Release Date: 1991
Developer: Human Entertainment
Publisher: HAL Laboratory
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: N/R
★★★⋆

Race around the world in this top-down isometric rally simulator. There are a slew of race options, such as weather, four or two-wheel drive, engines, and tire tread, which are used to compensate for the various stage challenges. No music during the gameplay lets down what is a generally pleasing package, as the car and stages look great. It's a tough game to master that moves at breakneck speed, so practice is essential to nail those hairpin bends and become the champ! – JE

Les Chevaliers Du Zodiaque: La Legende D'or (The Knights of the Zodiac: The Golden Legend)

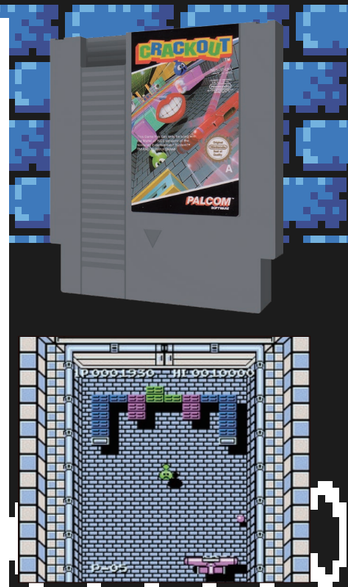
Genre: Action-RPG
Release Date: 1987
Developer: Hect, TOSE
Publisher: Bandai
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: N/R
★★★

Join Seiya in this fighting RPG based on the manga *Saint Seiya*. The battles are turn-based, so planning accordingly is key to winning a fight. Seiya must train and charge up his "cosmos" which deals out more damage to a foe than a regular attack. Charging an attack at the wrong time could result in defeat whereas a parry or dodge would help. Unless you know the French language or are a fan of the anime, it's hard to recommend or rate as the language barrier is firmly in place. Rocking soundtrack, though! – JE

Crackout

Genre: Paddle-and-Ball
Release Date: 1991
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Palcom Software
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: N/R
★★★⋆

In this *Breakout* clone, the object is to destroy all the colored blocks using the bat/ship and ball in order to proceed to the next stage. Enemies such as floating eyes, mouths, and other odd nasties try to get in the way of the ball to halt progress. Attacking them drops power-ups such as rockets, more powerful balls, and even a devastating multi-ball that assists greatly. It's a fun title, even if there are better in the genre. – JE



Devil World
Genre: Maze
Release Date: 1987
Developer: Nintendo R&D1
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: N/R
★★★⋆

Tamagon the dragon must collect crosses and dots to complete each stage in this interesting, overhead maze game. The Devil at the top of the screen changes the direction in which the map moves, which makes it more challenging, as the player also has to avoid getting squished. Once a cross is obtained, Tamagon can attack the Devil's minions with fireballs, but once they are gone he must get another in order to collect the dots, adding strategy. Alternate stages have Tamagon collecting bibles to push into the center of the stage. A simple yet fun game that is worth seeking out. – JE

Dropzone
Genre: Shooter
Release Date: 1992
Developer: Arena Graphics
Ported by: Eurocom
Publisher: Mindscape
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: N/R
★★★

Take control of a jetpack-flying, laser-shooting defender tasked with repelling an alien invasion in this side-scrolling shooter. To complete a stage, the player must rescue stranded scientists and return them to base while fending off an onslaught of varied alien ships, spores, and androids. They try to abduct the scientists, so the challenge is to learn how to micromanage the waves of enemies. A difficult but hard-to-put-down title that is all about getting those high scores. – JE

Elite
Genre: Shooter, Simulation
Release Date: 1991
Developer: David Braben, Ian Bell
Publisher: Imagineer
Players: 1
Special Features: Battery Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: N/R
★★★★⋆

Travel through space in wireframe 3D perspective in this space exploration sim. Proceed through the unknown across the solar system, trade goods to make money, take on military contracts, upgrade your ship's weapons and capabilities, and even conduct interplanetary space warfare, all in a day. The lack of a keyboard does hamper the game somewhat (it was ported from the PC), but it does have handy onscreen icons to assist. This staggering open-ended game requires weeks if not months of attention. – JE

Formula 1 Sensation
Genre: Racing
Release Date: 1993
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Palcom Software
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: N/R
★★★⋆

Compete on actual Formula 1 courses in fully licensed car types in this realistic racing simulator. From Nigel Mansell to the legendary Ayrton Senna, the whole roster is full of household names to best become the pole position. The game plays behind the chosen car, which feels responsive and really gives the game a sense of speed. Brakes, tires, and engines are customizable to convey that authentic racing feel. Different weather can occur during a race too, so make sure to stop in the pits to attach those wet tires! – JE

Hammerin' Harry
Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: 1991
Developer: Irem
Publisher: Irem
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: N/R
★★★★

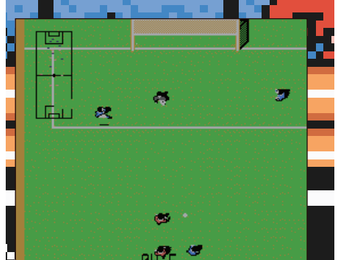
Join Harry in his quest to whack everything that moves in this super fun side-scrolling action-platformer. The Rusty Nailers gang have destroyed Harry's home and are raising heck in the neighborhood, and it's up to him to assert his vengeance! A host of power-ups are available to assist him including a destructive spinning mallet attack to take on builders, security guards, and even flamethrowing mercenaries. There's an awesome soundtrack, great-looking anime sprites, and quality gameplay to boot. – JE

International Cricket
Genre: Sports
Release Date: 1992
Developer: Beam Software
Publisher: Laser Beam Entertainment
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: N/R
★★★⋆

Compete in the World Series of cricket as one of eight teams in a fairly solid reenactment of the sport. The gameplay flicks between camera angles depending on the current player's action. If batting or bowling, the game focuses behind the action. When the ball is struck, the display jumps to the horizontal fielding mode to show more of the field. Choosing the right team members will help to win, but the game really ramps up the difficulty against some of the more famous teams. An enjoyable game for cricket fans. – JE

Kick Off
Genre: Sports
Release Date: 1991
Developer: Dino Dini
Ported by: Enigma Variations
Publisher: Imagineer
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: N/R
★★★

Play for trophies, cups, and even a league championship in this vertically scrolling take of the funny old game. Eight European international teams are selectable before the action commences. The top-down view seems difficult to get on with at first, but once the controls are mastered it becomes easy and fun to pass, run, and shoot to victory. A radar mini-map showing player positions also assists when thinking of passing long. – JE



Konami Hyper Soccer
Genre: Sports
Release Date: 1992
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Konami
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: N/R
★★★⋆

Choose between an impressive 24 teams and battle it out to win the tournament on the pitch. Each team has initial skill points to assign before a match to improve stats such as offense, defense, and skill. The game plays on a traditional side view and the player sprites look big and chunky though they all have no facial features and are identical clones of one another. The gameplay is fast and frantic though, which gives it a welcome arcade feel. – JE

TIME 0:12

The Legend of Prince Valiant

Genre: Action
Release Date: 1992
Developer: Ocean Software
Publisher: Ocean Software
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: N/R
★★★

Based on the comic strip and animated series, the player must help Valiant in his quest to find Camelot by jumping over obstacles in his path and fighting an assortment of evil-doers via throwing knives. This is used to combat forest dwellers, dragons, and spiders. A first-person bow-and-arrow shooting stage and one where you use cannons to sink ships add some decent variety to the affair. – JE

The Lion King

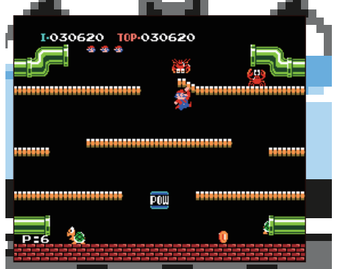
Genre: Platformer
Release Date: 1995
Developer: Westwood Studios
Ported by: Dark Technologies
Publisher: Virgin Interactive Entertainment
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: N/R
★★

Follow Simba the lion cub from the hit Disney film as he jumps and climbs around in his very own adventure. The animation for Simba is outstanding, but sadly the level design is lazily repetitive and drab-looking. The screen also jerks when scrolling, which is off-putting. A "stampede" stage is different, but doesn't add much in this very short outing. The music, however, is an excellent rendition of the film score. Half of the game may be missing, as the SNES version has the player controlling a fully grown lion Simba for the last portion. – JE

Mario Bros.

Genre: Platformer
Release Date: 1993
Developer: Nintendo R&D1
Ported by: Nintendo EAD
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-2 (Simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: N/R
★★★★

Based on the Famicom Disk System re-release, this port of the arcade game differs from the NTSC version. While Mario and Luigi still have to bop critters from underneath and then kick them to eliminate them on single-screen levels, this improved version has updated graphics, music, and even nice intermission cutscenes that introduce new enemies. The biggest and most welcome change though is to the gameplay, with Mario and Luigi now able to change their jump direction in midair. – PC



Mr. Gimmick

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: 1992
Developer: Sunsoft
Publisher: Sunsoft
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: N/R
★★★★★

Gimmick, a green toy come to life, has to save his kidnapped friend from the other jealous toys. Armed with a star, which can be thrown and bounced around with realistic physics, players will encounter colorful and well-thought-out stages with interesting, cartoony enemies that display some nice personality and AI. Wonderful graphics, great character design, excellent controls, and some of the best music of the 8-bit era round out a near-perfect title. Those that master the high degree of difficulty are in for a fantastic ride. – PC

New Ghostbusters II

Genre: Action
Release Date: 1990
Developer: HAL Laboratory
Publisher: HAL Laboratory
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: N/R
★★★★

In this fun action game based on the hit movie, the player controls two Busters at the same time in top-down locations from the film. After selecting from Peter, Ray, Egon, Winston, or even Louis, play begins. The object is to zap/stun all the ghosts with the proton pack while the following AI assistant player comes up and captures them with the ghost trap. The game follows the movie's plot, has fun monsters and stage bosses to "bust," has good graphics and sound, and has nice, snappy controls to keep things interesting. – PC

Noah's Ark

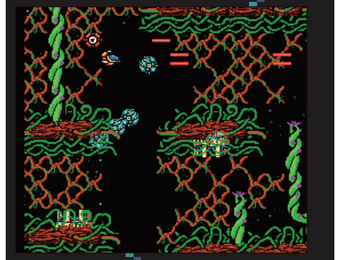
Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: 1992
Developer: Source Research & Development
Publisher: Konami
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: N/R
★★★★½

In this very colorful side-scroller, players control Noah in his quest to save the animals of the world. Noah controls perfectly and can shoot arrows as his main form of attack (other weapons and power-ups are available) and also can perform a jump stun. As each stage progresses, the water level rises (that Noah can swim in), adding an extra layer of panic to an already hectic game. Mix in some shooter-style sections and a quality soundtrack, and you have yourself an outstanding game. – JE

Over Horizon

Genre: Shooter
Release Date: 1991
Developer: Hot-B, Pixel
Publisher: Takara
Players: 1
Special Features: Edit Mode
Type: Licensed
Availability: N/R
★★★★½

This horizontal shooter features space action aplenty in this gorgeous-looking effort. Bring down scores of enemy ships to collect better firepower, such as improved lasers and option-follow bots. A great feature of this game is also the ability to shoot backwards. The only downside to the game is the occasional screen flicker on sprites, but when it looks, sounds, and plays this well, it is only a minor grievance. A weapon and bots editor rounds out an excellent experience. – JE



Parasol Stars: Rainbow Islands II

Genre: Action
Release Date: 1992
Developer: Ocean Software
Publisher: Taito
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: N/R
★★★½

Single-screen arcade action has the player dispatching all enemies on each stage using Bubby's trusty umbrella attack. Scoop up foes and hurl them towards a whole host of nasties including unicorns, seahorses, and even musical instruments. Collect water droplets to charge up a power attack capable of shooting across the screen for extra damage. Seven worlds await as well as secret bonus planets featuring other Taito characters from *Bubble Bobble* and even Doh! from *Arkanoid*! – JE

Parodius

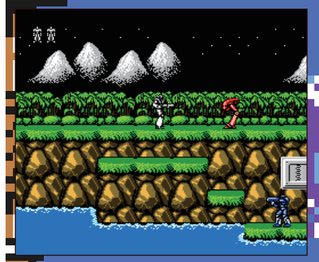
Genre: Shooter
Release Date: 1992
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Palcom Software
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: N/R
★★★★

Join the Vic Viper, Pentarou, and other Konami characters in this wacky yet enjoyable horizontal shooter featuring several of the company's intellectual properties. Each of the four playable characters has unique and upgradable attacks via capsules that can be stored and used by the player. A great offshoot conversion of *Gradius* is only let down by heavy sprite flicker and occasional slowdown. Just try keeping a straight face when fighting a pirate ship that is a cat. – JE

Probotector

Genre: Run and Gun Shooter
Release Date: 1990
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Konami
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: N/R
★★★★½

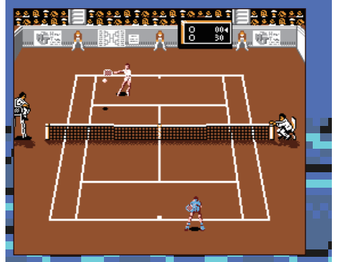
This version of *Contra* is nearly identical to that North American title, with the exception of the human hero and humanoid alien enemy characters all being reskinned and replaced by robots. This doesn't affect the gameplay, but what does is the PAL conversion being slowed down a bit to accomodate for the different PAL NES clock speed. These changes slighty mar an otherwise excellent title. The sequel would likewise contain similar changes from *Super C*, released in 1992 as *Probotector II: Return of the Evil Forces*. – PC



Rackets & Rivals

Genre: Sports
Release Date: 1993
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Palcom Software
Players: 1-4 (simultaneous)
Special Features: NES Four Score / Satellite compatible
Type: Licensed
Availability: N/R
★½

This tennis simulation features practice, exhibition, and tournament modes, with singles and doubles action for up to four players. There is a good amount of features here, including three different court types, but the gameplay functions poorly. While the players look good and the serving function is nice, returning shots is a chore due to the very precise timing and high degree of accuracy required. If the player is even off by a hair, the swing won't connect, resulting in a lot of missed shots. Even with practice, this makes the game barely tolerable. – PC



Rainbow Islands

Genre: Action
Release Date: 1992
Developer: Taito
Ported by: Ocean Software
Publisher: Ocean Software
Players: 1-2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: N/R
★★★½

In this arcade-style game, Bub and Bob must traverse vertical platform levels by shooting out rainbows and climbing/jumping on them. These rainbows can also be used to trap and defeat the cute enemies encountered. Food items can be collected for bonus points, and power-ups are available, but water will rise if the player takes too long on a stage. At the end of each of the seven different worlds is a boss that must be defeated. Cute character design, colorful graphics, and catchy music make the game a fun romp, at least in small bursts. – PC

Road Fighter

Genre: Racing
Release Date: 1992
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Palcom Software
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: N/R
★★

This top-down racer tasks the player to avoid other vehicles and oil spillages and hit the checkpoints before the fuel gauge runs out. Race through the streets, over bridges, and along Miami-esque palm tree vistas while collecting bonus point cars. It's not an overly exciting game, but it has a good sense of speed about it. – JE

Rodland

Genre: Action-Platformer
Release Date: 1992
Developer: Jaleco
Ported by: The Sales Curve
Publisher: Storm
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: N/R
★★★★

Help Rit and Tam rescue their mother in single-screen, arcade-style fashion. Rit and Tam have magic wands at their disposal, and icons left behind by enemies, such as missiles and bouncing balls, can also help conquer the stage. The player can also magically create ladders which help navigate the stages plus act as a handy escape route from a whole host of weird and wonderful creatures. This fun arcade game is made even better with two players. – JE

Les Schtroumpfs (The Smurfs)

Genre: Platformer
Release Date: 1994
Developer: Bit Managers
Publisher: Infogrames
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: N/R
★★★½

This platforming adventure is based on the famous cartoon show. Bright colorful graphics and a breezy soundtrack complement the above average action. Jump on enemies such as flies, fish, dragonflies, hedgehogs, and any other Smurfy thing you can think of. The game does offer a bit of variety in its stages, such as the Smurfing down the river rapids section, flying along on a stork, and a host of different bonus stages. – JE

Super Mario Bros./ Tetris/Nintendo World Cup

Genre: Compilation
Release Date: 1988
Developer: Nintendo, Technōs Japan
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1-2 (alternating & simultaneous)
Special Features: NES Four Score / Satellite compatible, Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: N/R
N/R

This compilation cart has three games that are all selectable from a menu screen. On offer is the original *Super Mario Bros.* platformer, the classic *Tetris* puzzler, and soccer action with *Nintendo World Cup*. Please see the individual reviews in the NTSC section for more details on each title. – JE

Super Turrican

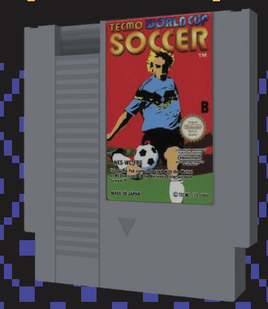
Genre: Run and Gun Shooter
Release Date: 1992
Developer: Rainbow Arts Software
Publisher: Imagineer
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: N/R
★★★½

In this high-octane run and gun shooter, anything that moves is an enemy! Players move around quickly, jump, and even run faster by holding B. Power-ups assist the mayhem, such as lasers, spread shots, ricochet bullets, and one-time use, screen-clearing bombs. If you like your shooters more chaotic, then this is for you. Just don't expect it to be a walk through the park! – JE

Tecmo World Cup Soccer

Genre: Sports
Release Date: 1991
Developer: Tecmo
Publisher: Tecmo
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: N/R
★★★

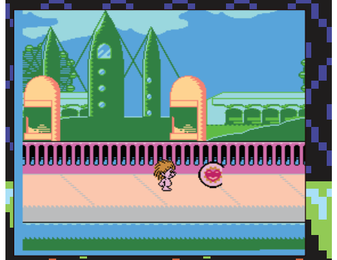
16 international teams compete to win the Tecmo World Cup in this overhead vertical soccer sim. Pass, shoot, and slide tackle with ease with the simple control mechanics that complement the decent presentation. The players do all look alike, but the goalkeeper is particularly well-animated, as is the 3D effect on the ball. The downside is having to beat all the teams, but thankfully a password system is in place. Using substitutes and changing formations are missing, but this is a fun representation of the beautiful game. – JE



The Trolls in Crazyland

Genre: Platformer
Release Date: 1993
Developer: KID
Publisher: American Softworks
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: N/R
★

A reskinned Famicom title called *Doki! Doki! Yuenchi* sees the titular Troll saving a girl from being kidnapped by an evil shadow from an amusement park. This side-scrolling platformer has the player using a ball to kick at enemies while traversing the repetitive fairground attractions. Poor animation and sluggish controls do not improve the lack of fun for this cheap cash-in title. – JE



Ufouria: The Saga

Genre: Platformer
Release Date: 1991
Developer: Sunsoft
Publisher: Sunsoft
Players: 1
Special Features: Password Save
Type: Licensed
Availability: N/R
★★★★

Bop-Louie must rescue three friends from the mysterious effects of a crater and find what is responsible in this side-scrolling platformer. Once they're rescued, Louie can use their special abilities. His main form of attack is a rock which can be thrown, as well as the standard jump attacks. His friends have higher jumps to reach secret areas, can drop bombs, and can freeze enemies in blocks of ice. This is a high quality/fun title that should keep players smiling throughout. – JE

HES Exclusive NES Releases

HES (Home Entertainment Suppliers) is an Australian company that distributes video games and gaming peripherals/accessories. In the late '80s and early '90s, HES distributed NES games from unlicensed developers/publishers, including titles from American Video Entertainment, American Game Cartridges, Color Dreams, Tengen, and more. Being an unlicensed publisher themselves, some versions of HES games even included a dongle attachment to connect to licensed NES cartridges in order to bypass the system's lockout chip. There were also alternative cart versions that only worked when directly piggybacked with a licensed NES cartridge. Listed here are those titles that were exclusive to Australia and not games otherwise released in North America, including a few compilation carts. All reviews in this section are courtesy of Jim Evans.

4 in 1 Funblaster Pak

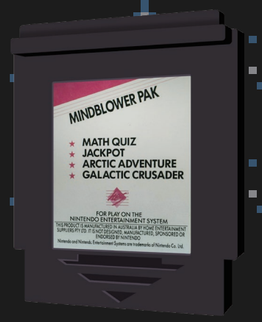
Genre: Compilation
Release Date: 1990
Developer: Thin Chen / Joy Van
Publisher: HES
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: N/R
N/R

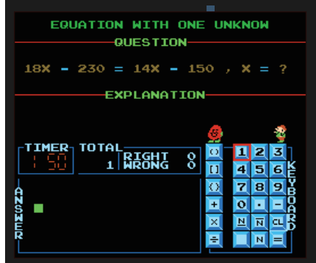
This four-in-one compilation cartridge features *Pipemania*, *Twin Eagle*, *Metal Fighter* and *Little Red Hood*. Please see the individual reviews of each game for more details. – JE

4 in 1 Mindblower Pak

Genre: Compilation
Release Date: 1990
Developer: Thin Chen / Joy Van
Publisher: HES
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Edit Mode
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: N/R
N/R

This four-in-one compilation cartridge features *Jackpot*, *Arctic Adventure*, *Galactic Crusader*, and original game *Math Quiz* (also known as *Magic Mathematic*). Fractions, equations, and simpler sums are offered up to be solved against the clock in what is essentially a glorified calculator for the television screen. Pretty colors and strange little characters that jump around the keypad and celebrate correct answers can't hide the cracks in a boring edutainment title. Please see the individual reviews on the other titles for more information on each. – JE

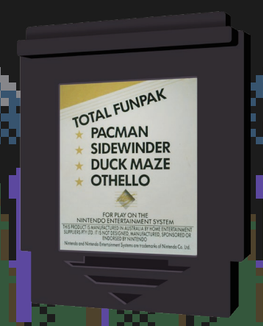




4 in 1 Total Funpak

Genre: Compilation
Release Date: 1990
Developer: Joy Van, Bit Corporation, Namco
Publisher: HES
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: N/R
N/R

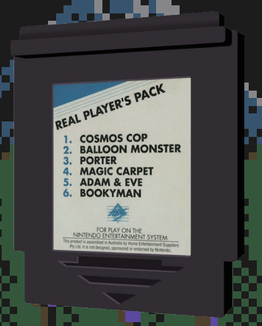
This four-in-one compilation cartridge features *Pac-Man*, *Sidewinder*, *Duck Maze*, and *Othello*. Please see the individual reviews for each game for more details on each. – JE



6 in 1 Real Player's Pack

Genre: Compilation
Release Date: 1992
Developer: NTDEC / Mega Soft
Publisher: HES
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: N/R
N/R

See *6 in 1* by Caltron for more details. This renamed cart includes *Cosmos Cop*, *Magic Carpet 1001*, *Balloon Monster*, *Adam and Eve*, *Porter*, and *Bookyman*. – JE



Arctic Adventure: The Penguin & Seal

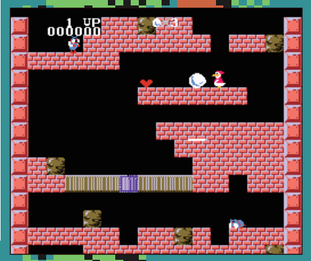
Genre: Action
Release Date: 1990
Developer: Thin Chen / Joy Van
Publisher: HES
Players: 1–2
Special Features: Edit Mode
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: N/R
★★

Also known as *Penguin and Seal*, this single-screen action game has the player controlling a penguin who must collect and push gems into his igloo in order to progress to the next stage. Hampering the progress are enemy seals who can be defeated by pushing blocks into them. It would be more fun if the erratic AI stayed at a constant difficulty. – JE

Duck Maze

Genre: Puzzle, Platformer
Release Date: 1990
Developer: Bit Corporation
Publisher: HES
Players: 1–2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: N/R
★★

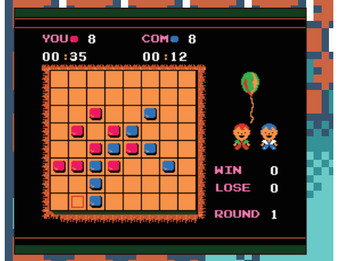
Also known as *Duck*, this vertically scrolling platform game features the titular mallard who has to roll an egg towards the exit of each stage. Duck can break blocks to drop the egg to the level below. Some strategy is involved as rats, cats, and environment hazards all need to be avoided as well as accidentally dropping on and crushing the egg. It's a good idea, but stodgy controls and dire sound spoil the fun. – JE



Othello

Genre: Board Game, Strategy
Release Date: 1988
Developer: Bit Corporation
Publisher: HES
Players: 1–2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: N/R
★★

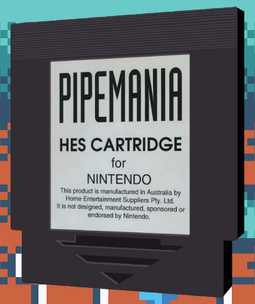
Not the same version as the licensed release, here you can play a classic game of Reversi against computer opponents of increasing difficulty. The idea is to change your opponent's color counters to your own in a turn-based battle of wits by surrounding their colored circles with yours. The garish colors, inexplicable cartoon characters, and the difficulty screen involving a cigarette-smoking man all blend to create a very odd mix. – JE

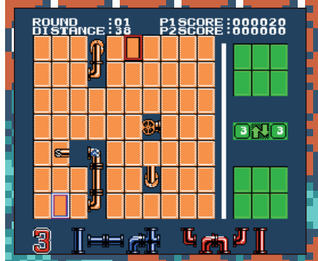


Pipemania

Genre: Puzzle
Release Date: 1991
Developer: Thin Chen / Joy Van
Publisher: HES
Players: 1–2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: N/R
★★

Connect various pieces of pipe together to keep an ever increasing flow of water at bay in this grid-based puzzler similar to *Pipe Dream*. Straight, bending, and crossover pipes are essential bits of kit to keep the game going as long as possible. Random pieces are given to place on the grid and it is up to the player to plan accordingly to have the running water reach the exit goal before it catches up. – JE

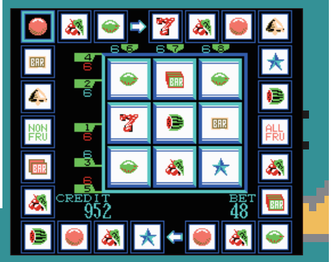




Jackpot

Genre: Gambling
Release Date: 1990
Developer: Thin Chen / Joy Van
Publisher: HES
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: N/R
★⋆

With 1000 credits, the player is tasked with risking it all to win big on a simple slot machine. Matching up different rows or columns can win in various ways, as lining up three of each icon represents different win amounts. With symbols like lucky number 7, stars, melons, and cherries, it is the stereotypical slot machine, with limited appeal. – JE



Little Red Hood

Genre: Action
Release Date: 1989
Developer: Thin Chen / Joy Van
Publisher: HES
Players: 1–2
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: N/R
★

Guide Red in navigating her way through various stages of forestry while avoiding snakes and other nefarious baddies in this top-down action title. Kicking trees drops fruit which reveals hidden stairways where a random-drop key is found. This is used to get to the next stage, then rinse and repeat. Collected gold can be spent in shops to buy health and slingshots, but these have limited use. Poor controls, little idea as to what to do and how to do it, bad graphics, and that one looping song all make this game one to avoid. – JE

Special and Promo Cartridges

The following are those cartridges that were not available in retail stores as game cartridges on their own, were included with an accessory/peripheral not widely available, or were special promo or competition cartridges created and not intended for wide public release. Please note that besides *Dizzy the Adventurer*, the other Aladdin Deck Enhancer games (*Big Nose Freaks Out*, *The Fantastic Adventures of Dizzy*, *Linus Spacehead's Cosmic Crusade*, *Micro Machines*, *Quattro Adventure*, and *Quattro Sports*) are omitted since the identical games were also released in normal cartridge form.

Dizzy the Adventurer

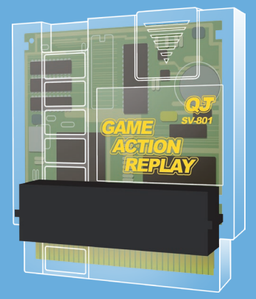
Genre: Adventure, Platformer
Release Date: 1993
Developer: Codemasters
Publisher: Camerica
Players: 1
Special Features: Aladdin Deck Enhancer (required)
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
★★★

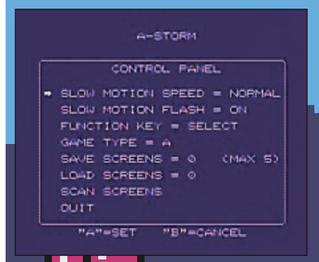
The game included with the Aladdin Deck Enhancer, this side-scrolling adventure stars Dizzy who sets out to rescue his girlfriend from an evil wizard. Gameplay consists of collecting items and using them to solve simple puzzles or giving them to characters in return for new items or to unlock new areas to explore. It looks and feels fun. However, the platforming feels a bit off with the strange jumping, and Dizzy will do a lot of back-tracking for items due to him only being able to hold three at a time. – PC

Game Action Replay

Genre: Other
Release Date: 1991
Developer: STD Entertainment
Publisher: STD Entertainment
Players: N/A
Special Features: N/A
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Rare
N/R

This peripheral is used by inserting an NES game into it and then inserting it into the console. Note that the NES has to be taken apart and the metal bar and upper tray removed for it to even fit. Besides a slow motion function, games could be saved and loaded at any point by an internal battery on five offered save slots that could be selected via menu. The input command SELECT + A would save a game's state to memory and SELECT + B would load the saved state. – PC





Mah Jong

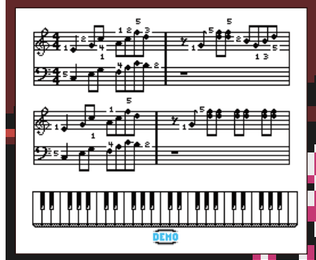
Genre: Strategy
Release Date: 1985
Developer: Nintendo
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Licensed
Availability: Extremely Rare
N/R

Originally debuting on the Famicom, this cart released for the Hong Kong NES features the traditional game of Mahjong, which is playable in three difficulty levels. Unlike the other licensed Hong Kong and Asian territory NES games, this title was released exclusively in its region and not in North America or Europe. There are very few copies that are accounted for today, making it one of the hardest NES games to find. – PC

The Miracle Piano Teaching System

Genre: Creativity, Educational
Release Date: 1990
Developer: The Software Toolworks
Publisher: The Software Toolworks
Players: 1
Special Features: Miracle Piano (required)
Type: Licensed
Availability: Very Uncommon
N/R

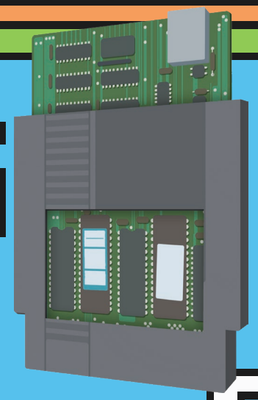
This cartridge was included with the Miracle Piano keyboard, which also included a foot pedal, keyboard power supply, headphones, and a MIDI controller cable to connect the keyboard to the NES. This title teaches basic and intermediate piano lessons, which are divided into chapters. There are also eight games/activities: Finger Numbers, Practice Notes, Steady Quarters, The Shooting Gallery, Practice Rhythms, Roboman, Sheet Music, and Flashcards. – PC



Nintendo Campus Challenge 1991

Genre: Other
Release Date: 1991
Developer: Nintendo, Rare
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Competition
Availability: Extremely Rare
N/R

Held at 60 college campuses and other locations in North America, this touring competition featured gamers playing this cart. After getting 25 coins in *Super Mario Bros. 3*, players must then score 100,000 in *Pin-Bot* before playing *Dr. Mario* until the time limit of 6:21 runs out. The final score is then tabulated by adding the three scores together: *Super Mario Bros. 3* (times 10), *Pin-Bot*, and *Dr. Mario* (times 100). Only one copy of this cartridge is known to still exist today. – PC



Nintendo World Championships 1990

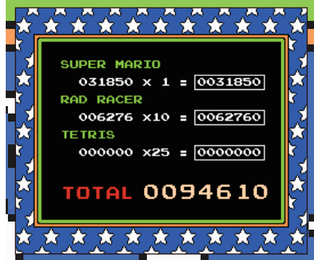
Genre: Other
Release Date: Mar. 1990
Developer: Nintendo, Square
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Competition, Prize
Availability: Extremely Rare
N/R

A part of the touring PowerFest 1990 event, the Nintendo World Championships was a competition played with this cartridge. In a 6:21 time limit, players must collect 50 coins in *Super Mario Bros.* before completing the first stage in *Rad Racer*. Finally, players will engage in *Tetris* until the time limit is reached. The final score is tabulated by adding the *Super Mario Bros.* score to the *Rad Racer* score (times 10) and the *Tetris* score (times 25). Ninety cartridges were given to the competition finalists, with each individually numbered. – PC

Nintendo World Championships 1990

Genre: Other
Release Date: 1990
Developer: Nintendo, Square
Publisher: Nintendo
Players: 1
Special Features: N/A
Type: Competition, Prize
Availability: Extremely Rare
N/R

This specially made competition cart is identical to the original *Nintendo World Championships 1990*, with the exception that the game board is placed in a gold cartridge shell with a cheaply printed and glued-on label. Twenty-six of these were created and given away in a contest held in the July/Aug. 1990 issue of *Nintendo Power* magazine. Only about half of the original 26 are still known to exist. This is widely regarded to be the most sought after video game in the world – the "Holy Grail." – PC



Racermate Challenge II

Genre: Sports
Release Date: 1991
Developer: Racermate
Publisher: Racermate
Players: 1-2 (simultaneous)
Special Features: Computrainer Racermate (required), Edit Mode
Type: Unlicensed
Availability: Very Rare
N/R

This bicycle training cartridge was sold with the following required accessories: bike trainer mount to attach to your bicycle of choice, LCD-mounted handlebars display, cadence sensor, earclip heart rate sensor, controller port interface, and power supply. Players can race against a computer or human opponent while speed, watts, rpm, and more are tracked. Different courses and difficulties are available, as well as custom courses. A few different variant cartridge shapes are known to exist. – PC

Test Cartridges

The following cartridges were distributed by Nintendo to authorized service repair centers and World of Nintendo retailers that participated in the World Class Service program. Customers could bring in their NES consoles and peripherals to be tested and possibly repaired, with their functionality being tested and problems diagnosed by using the test cartridges. Most of the test cartridges were produced in both the standard gray cart form as well as a yellow cartridge casing. A few – *The Legend of Zelda*, *Duck Hunt*, and *NTF2 Test* cartridge – were distributed in a single color. All test cartridges are very rare and hard to come by.

Control Deck Test

This was used to test system RAM, video RAM, colors displayed, object movement, and controller functionality of the NES.

Duck Hunt

Identical to the original game, this was most likely used to test console and Zapper functionality.

Joystick Test

This was used to test controller buttons for a two or four controller setup as well as turbo functionality.

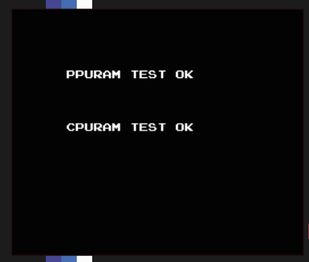
The Legend of Zelda

Identical to the original game, this was most likely used to test console functionality.

PRESS ANY BUTTON
TO STEP TO NEXT

NTF2 Test

This test cart is somewhat similar in functionality to *Control Deck Test*. Version 1.1 added a menu to run individual tests.



Port Test

This tested character display, video RAM, and CPU RAM on the NES.

1. A TEST
2. OBJ-CHR TES
3. CONTROLLER
SOUND TEST
COLOR TEST
ELECT BUTTON : S
START BUTTON : S

Power Pad Test

This was used to test and diagnose Power Pad peripheral functionality.

North American Cart Variants

Some NES games were released at different points with alternate labels due to an artwork redesign, the loss of a logo or movie license, “classic” rereleases, being unlicensed versus licensed cart releases, and more. Here are most (but not all) of the major NES cart variants that were released in North America, not counting differences in the Nintendo Seal of Quality design, which would sometimes vary in style and color from one game’s print run to the next. Omitted are minor label changes such as small letter symbols denoting a different print run, top label changes, and slight color/palette differences that would occur sometimes in early “black box” title releases. Three versus five-screw cart variants are not included, nor are ROM board variants.

Color Dreams and AVE Variants

Excluding *Mission Cobra*, *Operation Secret Storm*, *Robodemons*, and *Tagin' Dragon*, all titles published by Color Dreams (and subsidiary label Bunch Games) were produced in two different cartridge cases with different colors: blue and black. *Bible Adventures* was the only Wisdom Tree release with a similar variant. Usually, the blue cartridge seems to be the much more common version of the game, with the black cart variants seemingly having been produced in more limited quantities. The main exception to this is *Secret Scout*, with the blue version being much harder to find. The two versions of *Bible Adventures* have roughly the same availability. Most of the American Video Entertainment carts also have two versions: a squared off cart and one where the top left has a slanted diagonal edge. The exceptions to this rule are *Rad Racket II*, *Venice Beach Volleyball*, and *Wally Bear and the No! Gang*, where only the diagonal-edged version exists.

How the NES Zapper Works

by Joey Desena

The NES Zapper: Arguably the most successful aftermarket peripheral in video game history. The first thing most children of the 80s that came in contact with a Nintendo Entertainment System would do is... play *Super Mario Bros.* But after that, they might stray over to that OTHER game on the pack-in cartridge. The one that drew upon decades of technology to emulate the joy of shooting waterfowl and silver discs from the comfort of your living room - *Duck Hunt*, which of course was a showcase for the iconic Zapper.

Light guns are a technology born in days of yore. Back when electronics were still in diapers. Specifically the 1930s, which is when vacuum tubes were first developed. Light sensing, or photosensitive, vacuum tubes convert light into electricity. It didn't take long before enterprising individuals mounted these tubes onto moving targets, where fairgoers could shoot at them with rifles outfitted with light emitters - basically fancy gun-shaped flashlights. Thus, the light gun game was born. The very first was the Ray-O-Lite, which was created by Seeburg, a jukebox and orchestrion manufacturer, in 1936.

Fast forward decades later and arcades were still using this technology to great effect. Sauntering onto the scene was Nintendo, a fairly successful playing card manufacturer founded in the 19th century that broke into the electronic toy market in 1970. One of the first electronic toys made by Nintendo was the beam gun - which worked much in the same way as its predecessors. The beam gun, and Nintendo's shift to toys in general, was spearheaded by the future father of the Game Boy, Gunpei Yokoi. By 1973, Nintendo built on the success of the beam gun by opening a series of arcade ranges, which were actually remodeled bowling alleys set up with clay pigeons that contained light sensors. One year later, in 1974, *Wild Gunman* was released and became one of Nintendo's first arcade hits, though in a very different form than its NES counterpart. It used 16mm film to show gunmen popping up in an alley, where the player had to shoot them, or be shot - decidedly NOT like a baby's toy. By the 1980s, Nintendo released their first hit home console – the Famicom, or NES outside of Japan. A light gun accessory seemed a natural fit, though the idea of bringing this into the home was not new. In fact, the very first home console, the Magnavox Odyssey, also had a light rifle peripheral. And one of the most badass-looking ones at that.

Compared to other light gun technologies of the 1980s and 1990s, which used advanced techniques like timing the scan lines of your television, the Zapper was relatively simple in its approach. It sensed light via a photodiode - the grandson of light sensing vacuum tubes from the 30s. Photodiodes are small semiconductor components that convert light to electricity, and can be found in all sorts of gadgets today, from automatic night lights to remote control receivers, which sense infrared light.

The Zapper's process was relatively simple. When the trigger is pulled, the gun sends a signal to the game to blacken the screen for one frame. The photodiode then activates to take a baseline dark reading and ensure no light is detected. If it does, then it determines that the player is not pointing the Zapper at the TV at all, and no hits are recorded. This could be considered a "cheating failsafe," to make sure the player is actually aiming at the screen.

If everything's kosher, then it moves on to target validation. White rectangles are drawn on the screen where targets are located, and the photodiode is activated again. This time, if it's pointed at the white rectangle on the screen, it senses the light, and registers a hit. This technique is repeated in order to differentiate between different targets on the same screen.

For example, when there are two ducks on the screen in *Duck Hunt*, two separate frames are drawn – first one then the other – that correspond to each duck. For the first frame, a white rectangle overlays the target while the diode collects data on just the first duck. Then, that will be blacked out and the next frame is drawn, where the second duck's rectangle is placed on the screen, and the diode again collects data. This is known as sequential targeting. All of this occurs within a couple frames of motion; and North American tube televisions have a refresh rate of just over 60 frames per second. Your eyes will likely notice the quick blackening of the screen, but it's quick enough to not interfere with game play.

So, as I said – simple. However, over the years there have been several myths perpetuated about the Zapper, its limitations, and how it works with modern technology. Myths that need to be – shall we say – bursted.

Myth #1: Some people have claimed that when you use the Zapper with a cathode ray tube (or CRT) television – the prevailing TV technology in the 1980s – you need to make sure the screen is of the curved variety, as opposed to the more modern flat kind.

This may stem from the fact that curved CRTs were much more prevalent back in the 1980s. Therefore, it's what the Zapper was meant to be played on. And there may be a grain of truth to that. However, I've personally tested this theory on a flat screen CRT television and have no problem registering hits on the little duckies. Assuming my aim is true, of course.

Myth #2: You can't use a Zapper on modern HDTVs because they don't use scan lines.

Scan lines are a reference to the way CRT TVs shoot electrons at the screen in a repeated sweeping motion to create frames, and the illusion of movement. Plasma, LCD, and other HDTV tech simply illuminates all the pixels of the screen at once for each frame.

I can see where this line of thinking sprang up. Many game console

light guns of the 1980s and 1990s, such as the Menacer for Genesis and Super Scope for Super Nintendo, DID function using a more complicated method involving the timing of scan lines. But the Zapper simply checks the screen for light whenever you pull the trigger. After the "cheating check," it either sees white (meaning hit) or black (meaning miss). No scan lines necessary. However, it should be noted that Zappers DON'T work on HDTVs. Let me tell you a tale of the horrible troll known as "input lag."

HDTVs have a native resolution, unlike CRTs. That is, they have a grid of pixels that show the sharpest image at a particular resolution. In order to display non-native resolutions, these TVs use devices called video scalers. For example, a display with a native resolution of 1280x960 that's given a signal of 640x480 must scale the width and height by 2 to display the image. Most HDTVs nowadays have a native resolution of at least 1280×720 (or 720p). The NES has a resolution of 256x240 (or 240p). Video scalers have to process this signal, which introduces latency, or a delay. This delay can throw off the timing of the Zapper by up to 70 or so milliseconds, according to some media tests. Remember, that baseline black screen is only up for one frame - or about 16 milliseconds. So when the Zapper thinks it should be seeing the "cheat detecting" black screen at the beginning of a shot, it just sees a normal screen, and registers no hit.

Many televisions offer a "game mode," in which some of the signal processing responsible for most of the lag is sacrificed to decrease, but not eliminate, latency. And though this helps for games like Rock Band, which has its own workarounds built into the software, it's not enough for the poor forgotten Zapper.

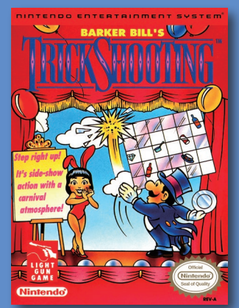
Myth #3: Lastly, the dreaded light bulb trick. There have been rumors circulating for years that one can cheat on certain games by pointing the Zapper at a light blub and pulling the trigger, ensuring that the photodiode is always detecting light.

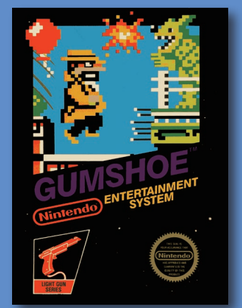
As I noted, this would require the "cheating mechanism" – where the diode must first detect a black screen before acquiring targets – to not be present in the game's code. Interestingly, this glitch would cause problems in games such as *Hogan's Alley*, where the gun would score hits on all valid targets as it quickly moved through them in sequence. Thus, you'd be unable to differentiate between good guys and bad guys, reducing the game to an instance of "kill them all and let God sort 'em out." One could see how this would be a problem.

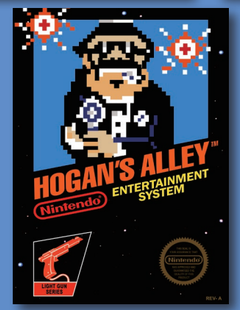
I don't know how such rumors about game consoles could possibly spread across the schoolyards of America – but I have never seen this in action. Nor has anyone I've talked to about it. Nor have I seen any video showing it. I think it most likely that there were other light gun systems in the past that didn't have this baseline check, and therefore could be fooled by a simple light bulb. And perhaps people extrapolated this behavior unfairly to the Zapper. Thus, I have to technically rate this myth as, "plausible, but unsubstantiated since I haven't seen any dang proof that it ever really happened."

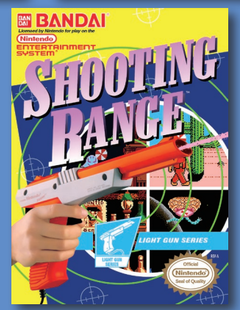
So that's the Zapper – A piece of gaming technology that's rather beautiful in its simplicity. Maybe you've been inspired to dust off the one you undoubtedly have in the closet and play with it again. Just CRT monitors only, please. And remember, it's not just nostalgia – it's science.

Joey "Roo" DeSena co-founded the geek-centric website, Clan of the Gray Wolf, in 2009. He has two flagship web series: 16-Bit Gems – spotlighting under-appreciated video games from the '90s – and The Way Games Work – explaining video game technology to the layman. Additionally, he has produced original content for Vsauce3 and RetrowareTV.







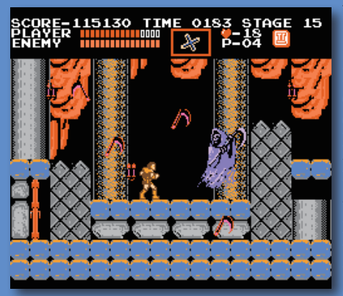


Horror on the NES

by James Rolfe

When it comes to "horror games," I'd suspect that the majority of gamers today think of anything post-*Resident Evil*. The realistic graphics and sound of today's generation of games are much scarier than anything I played as a kid in the late 80s / early 90s. The horror games on the NES have a different kind of charm that I think still holds up today. It's like comparing classic B&W horror films with modern shockers. The experiences of chills versus shocks always remain two separate things, but I prefer the classics. The 8-bit graphics of the NES required more imagination from the player.

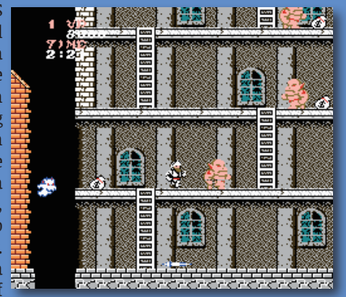
The *Castlevania* trilogy is the gold standard to me. It has every classic horror character imaginable: Mummies, Hunchbacks, and the Frankenstein monster, straight out of the Universal movies. It also reminds me of the Hammer horror films with all its Gothic scenery. It also draws from Greek mythology with the Medusa. Even the Grim Reaper makes an appearance; Death himself is working for Dracula.



When I think of *Castlevania*, the first things that come to mind are staircases that lead to nowhere, whipping candles, eating turkeys (or pork chops?) out of stone walls, and hopping backward every time you're hit. I can't forget the intense difficulty combined with the anticipation of seeing Dracula at the end. The spooky upbeat tunes kept you moving forward. Coming off of playing one-screen Atari games, I got overly excited when I made it to the bat at the end of the first level, thinking it was Dracula. Then I realized I had an entire adventure ahead of me.

Castlevania 2: Simon's Quest adopted a nonlinear style where you have to roam around and explore. It was a great concept, but not executed well. The clues that the townspeople give you are confusing and sometimes flat-out wrong. There are lots of bad translations and we can never forget the many peculiar lines, such as "Don't look into the death star or you'll die." Kneeling down at a wall while selecting a red crystal to wait for a tornado to come, or walking underneath a lake, or dropping garlic in a cemetery to get a knife, is the cryptic type of stuff that I remember this game best for. You needed to get the power: *Nintendo Power*. Only with magazine tips could you figure this game out.

Castlevania 3: Dracula's Curse returns to the original linear style, except for a few forking paths. It also had more playable characters. These were the kind of welcome updates that kept the series fresh. Once again, drawing from Universal monster movies as inspiration, the name Alucard from *Son of Dracula* (1943) is included. The difficulty is ramped up to such extreme proportions that an extra lives password was implemented with the appropriate phrase "HELPME".



Ghosts 'n Goblins is the first NES game I ever played, and still one of the most difficult. It's a beginner's trap, and its arcade cousin stole more quarters than we can imagine. The opening is very memorable and, in hindsight, sort of risqué. A couple are doing something (?!) in a cemetery when Satan appears, at first looking like he wants to join in, then takes the girl away. The man puts his clothes on, a knight's armor, and then sets off to rescue her. Classic! What follows is six levels of relentless torture, each more frustrating than the last, as you descend into the infernal hell-hole of the 8-bit underworld, taking two hit deaths, throwing fireballs that fly over the enemies, climbing ladders only to die by touching the foot of a beast, collecting money bags that don't help, getting stuck with unwanted weapons, all while being ambushed by high-pitched screeching pigs in blankets (hot dogs or sausage wrapped in bread).

LJN seemed to monopolize the movie-based games on the NES, which is why you see lots from them like *Friday the 13th*. For a kid too young to see slasher movies, this was my introduction to Jason Voorhees, in purple! Opening with a knife flying into the eye hole of a hockey mask, the game creates an unsettling, eerie mood. As you enter cabins, faceless people stand in front of you, motionless and creepy, and you're always in nervous suspense as to when Jason will show up next. But for the amount of spine-tingling ambience the game conjures up, it overshadows it all with its frustration factor. The navigation system is a complete mess, especially when you're inside the caves, with looping paths, and everything looking the same. There are many items to collect and steps to accomplish, but you'll never have time to do anything, because you have to keep answering to the Jason alarm, or else everybody dies one at a time. It's an ultimate challenge of multi-tasking, which always ends with the immortal game over screen, "You and your friends are dead."

Nightmare on Elm Street had some catchy tunes and intuitive side-scrolling action as you fight the most stock Halloween enemies imaginable, like spiders, bats, Frankenstein monsters, lollipop ghosts, and skeletons, fighting them all with your bare fists. You're not a real man until you're punching snakes right in the face! You walk down Elm Street, the longest street in the world, collecting Freddy's dog-bones, but it seems to me that hardly any of the entrances ever let me in. It's a dead end -where do I go- type of game, but it's notable for having a four-player option, using the NES Four Score or Satellite.

Beetlejuice also must be mentioned. Playing as the title character, you go around finding power-ups that expire within seconds, dying if you touch the edge of the screen, and stomping on bugs, except if it's a big bug, you bounce all over like a trampoline. It's the only game I can think of where, to get a cloud to move, you have to get a skeleton to shoot a fireball at a beehive. It throws away most of the potential and imagination of the Tim Burton film, and may be so loosely adapted that I think it has more to do with the star Betelgeuse in the constellation of Orion. Believe it or not, I back up that statement with facts, in thorough detail, in my episode of *Angry Video Game Nerd*.

There is a plethora of horror-related games on the NES, but these are my highlights, which I've done video reviews on. Sure these games all have flaws, but NES horror still has a unique appeal.

James Rolfe (born in 1980) grew up in the desolate Pine Barrens of Southern New Jersey. His imagination was fueled by local urban legends, and by watching a vast amount of classic horror and monster movies. As a child, he immediately pursued the arts, and took over the family VHS camera, to make his own zero-budget movies in his backyard. Later, he created the Angry Video Game Nerd character, which lead to a popular web series, following the advent of YouTube. Over 10 years later, the series is still going. Rolfe has made over 400 short films and videos, and completed his first feature film, Angry Video Game Nerd: The Movie.

Tengen and the Nintendo Lawsuit

by Norm Caruso

If you are a fan of the Nintendo Entertainment System (which I'm guessing you are, since you are reading this book), you may be familiar with Tengen games. The first unlicensed games for the NES, Tengen games were black and had a slightly different look, but were similar in size and weight to a standard cartridge.

Tengen was known primarily for their arcade ports and the *RBI Baseball* series. They even published a few Sega titles, such as *After Burner*! Sega on the Nintendo Entertainment System, who would have thought? There was also the close relationship with Namco, which resulted in ports of *Pac-Man*, *Ms. Pac-Man*, and *Pac-Mania*. Tengen even made their own version of *Tetris* for a short while, before a court ordered them to stop distributing the game due to licensing issues.

Although the carts are familiar, the story of Tengen is not. Our story revolves around a big legal battle between two juggernauts in the video game industry. A case that would not only redefine laws, but also how third party developers would make games for home consoles.

In 1984, Atari was in serious financial trouble. The Video Game Crash of 1983, brought on by a flood of consoles and poorly made games, devastated the once prolific company. At the end of the year, Atari had lost 539 million dollars. Massive layoffs followed. Business deals were canceled. Entire divisions were closed or consolidated. In May of 1984 alone, 700 employees were laid off. Steve Ross, president of parent company Warner Communications, came up with a plan to split the company, and sell them for as much as possible. Atari was split into two: Atari Corporation and Atari Games.

Atari Corporation, which handled the consumer products (personal computers, video game consoles), was sold to Jack Tramiel, the founder of the computer company Commodore. Atari Games, which had control of the coin-operated arcade games and software, was sold to a Japanese man, Masaya Nakamura. He owned another company, too: Namco.

Nakamura appointed Hideyuki Nakajima, president of Namco America, to run Atari Games. In his book *Game Over*, David Sheff described Nakajima as "... unusually open. He was a spark plug in a world of staid and sober executives." In other words, the perfect type of man to turn around Atari Games, which was still losing money and suffering layoffs.

He reduced the salaries of VPs and directors, froze salary increases for a year, and laid off 30 employees. Nakajima himself took a 20% paycut. While he was able to get Atari Games out of financial trouble, he had disagreements with Masaya Nakamura on what direction to take the company. Nakamura was hesitant to put more resources into the company, seeing them as a competitor to Namco. He also didn't like the fact that Warner still had a 40% stake in the company.

In 1987, Nakajima and Nakamura came to an agreement. Nakajima, along with several employees and Warner, would purchase 20% of the company from Nakamura. Nakajima would become the president, and resign from his position at Namco America.

Nakajima soon turned his eye toward the home console market, which had recently seen a resurgence with the Nintendo Entertainment System. At the time, Sega was not licensing games for their Master System, and the Atari 7800, released by Jack Tramiel's Atari Corporation, was barely doing anything. But there was a problem: Atari Games couldn't actually publish games under the Atari name, as Atari Corporation owned the rights to the consumer division. To get around this, Atari Games formed a new subsidiary, known as Tengen.

Nakajima came up with the name Tengen in a similar fashion as Nolan Bushnell came up with Atari. Bushnell named Atari after a term used in the Japanese game Go. The word Atari is used in the same way someone would say "check" while playing chess. Nakajima chose the word "Tengen," which represents the center of a Go board: the origin of heaven.

When it came to licensing with Nintendo, companies had to follow strict rules and regulations. Nintendo wasn't taking any chances, not after the Video Game Crash of 1983. Poor games littered the market, and this was their version of quality control. Nintendo president Hiroshi Yamauchi even stated "Atari collapsed because they gave too much freedom to third-party developers and the market was swamped with rubbish games."

To become a licensee, you first had to submit your games for approval. Nintendo had the right to make changes, such as removing blood or religious symbols. Once approved, you had to purchase your cartridges from Nintendo. The cost ranged anywhere from $9-$14 dollars, with a minimum order of 10,000 cartridges. Companies were only allowed to make five games per year, and were to be exclusive to the NES for two years. Some companies formed subsidiaries in an effort to publish more games. Konami published several games under the Ultra Games label, while Acclaim used LJN.

However, the most brilliant move by Nintendo was their lockout chip technology, which prevented unlicensed games from even playing on the system. Both the console and the game cartridge contained a security chip that spoke to each other with a program called "10NES." If they could communicate successfully, the game would play. If not... nothing.

Nakajima wasn't a fan of the licensing agreement, but he met with Nintendo of America president Minoru Arakawa and vice president Howard Lincoln anyway. There was mutual interest between the two companies. Nintendo saw Atari Games as a recognized brand with a slew of great titles they could potentially bring to the NES. Nakajima pushed hard for a better deal, but Arakawa and Lincoln wouldn't budge. All licensees had to be treated the same. Although upset, Nakajima reluctantly agreed.

On January 18th, 1988, Tengen officially became a Nintendo licensee. Their first three games were announced that same year at the June Consumer Electronics Show: *Gauntlet*, *Pac-Man*, and *RBI Baseball*. After the agreement, Nakajima and Arakawa would frequently meet for dinner, or play a round of golf, a nice gesture between two business partners. However, Arakawa noticed Nakajima was quite chatty, asking many questions about Nintendo's business and its distribution strategy to retailers. Not wanting to seem rude, and having good faith in Nakajima, Arakawa shared information. He had no idea that behind closed doors at Atari Games, engineers were working to crack the NES lockout chip.

A full year earlier, in 1986, Atari Games was aware of the strict demands of the Nintendo licensee program. Nakajima, along with other executives, were not fans. Nintendo was new to the video game world, and their demands seemed arrogant, attempting to control the market. Said COO Dan Van Elderen: "The way Nintendo did business was like Ford introducing a car that could only use Ford gasoline."

Lawyers for Atari Games read over the licensing agreement, to see if there was any way to make games for the NES without going through Nintendo. There was a way, but it all hinged on being able to get around the lockout chip technology. Engineers were given the task to reverse-engineer the chip. After many attempts, they found no success. One engineer, Pat Mcarthey wrote, "Unless there is a specific profit motivation, or there is a hacker available with nothing to do, I recommend that the investigation end here."

It was clear that in order to reverse-engineer the chips, they would need access to the 10NES program. However, Nintendo had copyrighted the algorithm. It was stored safely in the copyright office storage facility in Landover, Maryland. The copyright office allows anyone to walk in and ask to look at material. But for certain material like 10NES, you can't make a copy to take with you, or even take notes, unless the material is the subject of litigation.

Atari lawyers filled out a form, requesting a copy of the 10NES program, falsely alleging that they were the defendants in a case regarding the algorithm in the US District Court of Northern California. In no time at all, Atari Games suddenly had a copy of the 10NES program, obtained illegally.

With access to the program, Atari engineers had no trouble at all reverse-engineering the lockout chips. They created a similar chip, that contained their duplicate 10NES program, and tested it in a cartridge. It worked. They dubbed their clone, "Rabbit." Atari Games' plan to circumvent the strict NES licensing agreement was coming to fruition.

Tengen may have picked the worst possible time to become a Nintendo licensee. In 1988, the entire electronics industry was experiencing a chip shortage, simply due to high demand. Nintendo was hit hard. Because they manufactured every single game, they had to let all of their licensees know that they would be getting fewer games than originally planned.

Some companies were furious. The loss of sales would cut deep into their profits. Dan Van Elderen, COO of Tengen, asked if they could just find surplus chips themselves, without Nintendo. Nintendo agreed, but only if Tengen would pay the difference in cost. The chips also had to pass their standards. After finding a supplier in the USA, Tengen submitted the chip to Nintendo for review. It was denied.

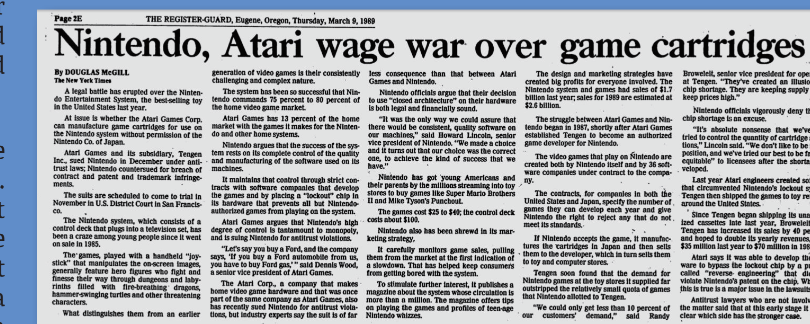
One Tengen spokesperson claimed that due to the chip shortages and Nintendo's policies, they were only able to satisfy less than ten percent of the demand. Nakajima and other executives saw this as the final straw. Nintendo's licensing policies were hurting their business, and they had finally found a way around the lockout chip. It was the perfect time to strike.

In December of 1988, Atari Games sued Nintendo for antitrust violations and unfair competition for a sum of $100 million. At the same time, they sent out their new games containing the Rabbit chip to retail stores, the very first unlicensed games for the Nintendo Entertainment System.

After the 1988 Christmas party at Nintendo, Minoru Arakawa and Howard Lincoln received the news that Atari Games was suing them. They were completely blindsided. They quickly contacted Nintendo of Japan. President Hiroshi Yamauchi was clear: Atari Games and their unlicensed cartridges must be stopped.

Nakajima met with Arakawa to discuss the lawsuit. He told him he never wanted it to come to this, but due to Nintendo's strict rules, he felt he had no choice. Nakajima offered to withdraw the suit. "Let us do our own manufacturing," he said. Arakawa said no. The lawsuit would continue.

Atari Games went to the media, accusing Nintendo of creating a chip shortage in order to keep prices high. Nintendo vigorously denied the claim, calling it "absolute nonsense." For Nintendo vice president Howard Lincoln, it was a total betrayal of their initial licensing agreement with Tengen. He stated, "I thought to myself, you have no idea what you have taken on: A tiger, who will skin you piece by piece."



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Nintendo, Atari wage war over game cartridges

By DOUGLAS McGILL
The New York Times

A legal battle has erupted over the Nintendo Entertainment System, the best-selling toy in the United States last year.

At issue is whether the Atari Games Corp. can manufacture game cartridges for use on the Nintendo system without permission of the Nintendo Co. of Japan.

Atari Games and its subsidiary, Tengen Inc., sued Nintendo in December under antitrust laws; Nintendo countersued for breach of contract and patent and trademark infringements.

The suits are scheduled to come to trial in November in U.S. District Court in San Francisco.

The Nintendo system, which consists of a control deck that plugs into a television set, has been a craze among young people since it went on sale in 1985.

The games, played with a handheld "joystick" that manipulates the on-screen images, generally feature hero figures who fight and finesse their way through dungeons and labyrinths filled with fire-breathing dragons, hammer-swinging turtles and other threatening characters.

What distinguishes them from an earlier generation of video games is their consistently challenging and complex nature.

The system has been so successful that Nintendo commands 75 percent to 80 percent of the home video game market.

Atari Games has 13 percent of the home market with the games it makes for the Nintendo and other home systems.

Nintendo argues that the success of the system rests on its complete control of the quality and manufacturing of the software used on its machines.

It maintains that control through strict contracts with software companies that develop the games and by placing a "lockout" chip in its hardware that prevents all but Nintendo-authorized games from playing on the system.

Atari Games argues that Nintendo's high degree of control is tantamount to monopoly, and is suing Nintendo for antitrust violations.

"Let's say you buy a Ford, and the company says, 'If you buy a Ford automobile from us, you have to buy Ford gas,'" said Dennis Wood, a senior vice president of Atari Games.

The Atari Corp., a company that makes home video game hardware and that was once part of the same company as Atari Games, also has recently sued Nintendo for antitrust violations, but industry experts say the suit is of far less consequence than that between Atari Games and Nintendo.

Nintendo officials argue that their decision to use "closed architecture" on their hardware is both legal and financially sound.

"It was the only way we could assure that there would be consistent, quality software on our machines," said Howard Lincoln, senior vice president of Nintendo. "We made a choice and it turns out that our choice was the correct one, to achieve the kind of success that we have."

Nintendo has got young Americans and their parents by the millions streaming into toy stores to buy games like Super Mario Brothers II and Mike Tyson's Punchout.

The games cost $25 to $40; the control deck costs about $100.

Nintendo also has been shrewd in its marketing strategy.

It carefully monitors game sales, pulling them from the market at the first indication of a slowdown. That has helped keep consumers from getting bored with the system.

To stimulate further interest, it publishes a magazine about the system whose circulation is more than a million. The magazine offers tips on playing the games and profiles of teen-age Nintendo whizzes.

The design and marketing strategies have created big profits for everyone involved. The Nintendo system and games had sales of $1.7 billion last year; sales for 1989 are estimated at $2.6 billion.

The struggle between Atari Games and Nintendo began in 1987, shortly after Atari Games established Tengen to become an authorized game developer for Nintendo.

The video games that play on Nintendo are created both by Nintendo itself and by 36 software companies under contract to the company.

The contracts, for companies in both the United States and Japan, specify the number of games they can develop each year and give Nintendo the right to reject any that do not meet its standards.

If Nintendo accepts the game, it manufactures the cartridges in Japan and then sells them to the developer, which in turn sells them to toy and computer stores.

Tengen soon found that the demand for Nintendo games at the toy stores it supplied far outstripped the relatively small quota of games that Nintendo allotted to Tengen.

"We could only get less than 10 percent of our customers' demand," said Randy Broweleit, senior vice president for operations at Tengen. "They've created an illusion of a chip shortage. They are keeping supply low to keep prices high."

Nintendo officials vigorously deny that the chip shortage is an excuse.

"It's absolute nonsense that we've ever tried to control the quantity of cartridge allocations," Lincoln said. "We don't like to be in that position, and we've tried our best to be fair and equitable" to licensees after the shortage developed.

Last year Atari engineers created software that circumvented Nintendo's lockout system. Tengen then shipped the games to toy retailers around the United States.

Since Tengen began shipping its unauthorized cassettes late last year, Broweleit said, Tengen has increased its sales by 40 percent, and hoped to double its yearly revenues, from $35 million last year to $70 million in 1989.

Atari says it was able to develop the software to bypass the lockout chip by a process called "reverse engineering" that did not violate Nintendo's patent on the chip. Whether this is true is a major issue in the lawsuits.

Antitrust lawyers who are not involved in the matter said that at this early stage it is not clear which side has the stronger case.

Nintendo quickly countersued in February of 1989, stating that Tengen had entered the Nintendo licensee program fraudulently, obtaining technical support and detailed information about retailers for the sole purpose of making their unlicensed games. They also sued for Tengen's sales of unauthorized and unsupported games on the NES, as well as patent infringement on their lockout security system.

Later that year in November, they amended their suit, adding that Atari Games unlawfully obtained their copyrighted 10NES program from the US Copyright Office. All of the allegations and suits would be condensed into one case. It was only the beginning of a long, drawn-out battle between the two juggernauts.

Nintendo employed a strategy of intimidation outside of the courtroom, threatening retailers with legal action or cutting them out of supply if they sold Tengen products. Nintendo products sold consistently throughout the year for retailers, sometimes making up 50% of sales. For some, it was simply too risky to sell the unlicensed games. Retailers such as Toys "R" Us, WalMart, Target, and Circus World all stopped selling Tengen games.

Atari Games filed an injunction in order to stop Nintendo from threatening its customers. Judge Fern Smith, who would oversee the entire case, ruled that Atari and Nintendo could not interfere with each other's customers. Both companies appealed, and the injunction was lifted. Nintendo continued to contact retailers. Despite the legal battles and retailer threats, Tengen was seeing good returns on its unlicensed games. Sales were up by 40%.

In March of 1991, in the US District Court of Northern California, Judge Fern Smith would decide whether or not Tengen had a legal right to sell their unlicensed games. It all boiled down to the Rabbit chip included in every Tengen cartridge. Did it use an exact copy of the 10NES program in order to authenticate with the chip inside the NES?

Atari Games argued that they took the copyright office documents because it was ridiculous to think someone could reverse-engineer a chip just by looking at papers. They felt they were entitled to, quote, "self-help." They also claimed that the documents weren't important anyway, as they had already cracked the 10NES program. But evidence suggested otherwise.

The copyright on the 10NES program was dated 1985. However, in 1987, Nintendo made some modifications to the program, deleting some unnecessary code. The Rabbit chip contained the deleted code. 10NES also had other functions, beyond just unlocking the console. The Rabbit program contained those as well.

It was clear to Judge Fern Smith that the program contained inside Tengen's rabbit Chip was a direct copy of the 10NES program. She ordered

Atari Games to immediately cease producing, distributing, and selling their unlicensed games, as well as recall all product currently on store shelves. Smith also harshly criticized the company for their actions.

Atari Games would appeal, claiming the decision would force them to shut down Tengen, laying off 39 employees, a huge financial impact. Judge Fern Smith agreed, and suspended her decision. Tengen games would remain on store shelves – for now.

On September 10th, 1992, the case went to the US Court of Appeals in Washington, D.C. As a defense to their copyright infringement, Atari Games argued that Nintendo had misused its copyright of the lockout program, giving them control of games developed by third-party companies. They asserted that Nintendo's misuse of copyright should prevent copyright enforcement. They also argued that reverse-engineering the chip should fall under fair-use.

The Court disagreed with copyright misuse, stating "The record does not demonstrate, as a matter of law, that such restrictions restrain the creativity of Nintendo licensees..." They did, however, rule that reverse-engineering was fair use, stating: "Reverse engineering object code to discern the unprotectable ideas in a computer program is a fair use."

Ultimately, the court agreed with Judge Fern Smith's original decision – Atari Games had stolen the 10NES program code – and ordered them to stop making and selling their unauthorized Tengen game cartridges for the NES. After four years of litigation, the battle was over. Tengen ceased production of NES games, and shifted their focus to other systems, mostly the Sega Genesis, which was gaining ground in the market share. Atari Games' accusation that Nintendo violated antitrust laws would be settled out of court.

Although Nintendo won the battle, Atari Games' lawsuit ultimately brought about sweeping changes. The case helped establish the legality of reverse engineering. It also reformed how the copyright office gave access to copyrighted material. Their antitrust suit also got the attention of other companies. Jack Tramiel's Atari Corporation also sued Nintendo for $250 million for violation of antitrust laws in 1989. Tramiel claimed Nintendo's practice of console exclusivity for two years prevented Atari from getting good games. The case would ultimately be dismissed.

In December of 1989, Representative Dennis Eckart of Ohio urged the Justice Department's antitrust division to investigate Nintendo, citing "unreasonable tactics to restrain competitors." This led to an investigation by the Federal Trade Comission. A year later, in October of 1990, Nintendo announced they had decided to ease their licensing restrictions, which included the two-year exclusivity rule. In 1991, the FTC and Nintendo settled the case. Nintendo was ordered to send $5 vouchers to any person who had purchased an NES game between June 1988 and December 1990. Nintendo dealers were now allowed to sell games, cartridges, and accessories, at any price they chose.

The case even reached the Japanese video game market. In 1989, Namco had to renew their initial licensing agreement with Nintendo, which originally gave them special provisions for being one of the first licensees. Nakajima's old boss, Masaya Nakamura, met with Nintendo president Hiroshi Yamauchi to discuss the new terms. Yamauchi refused to give Nakamura the special treatment he once had. Nakamura was furious, and spoke out publicly against Nintendo's monopolistic practices. He also declared that Namco would begin development of games for Sega's latest console, the Mega Drive.

Hideyuki Nakajima would run Atari Games into the 1990s. In 1994, Time Warner decided to fold both Atari Games and Tengen into their new company, Time Warner Interactive. Around the same time, Nakajima announced he was changing his role within the company, but friends, family, and co-workers knew the truth. He was battling lung cancer, and simply couldn't handle the responsiblities of running the company. On July 11, 1994, Hideyuki Nakajima passed away in Tokyo.

Under Nakajima's leadership, Atari Games aggressively attacked Nintendo's business practices. It would eventually lead to Nintendo changing their strict policies, which allowed developers to make their games for other consoles. This helped systems like the Sega Genesis gain a stronger foothold in the market share, creating a more open market. Hopefully the next time you pick up one of those Tengen carts, you'll remember how important they were to the industry!

Norman Caruso is the creator of Gaming Historian, a documentary series on YouTube that discusses the history of video games. His work has been featured on Polygon, Destructoid, Game Informer, and Capcom, as well as sources for Associated Press articles and research papers. He graduated from Elizabeth City State University with a degree in history in 2009.

From Plastic to Pixels

by Dan Eardley

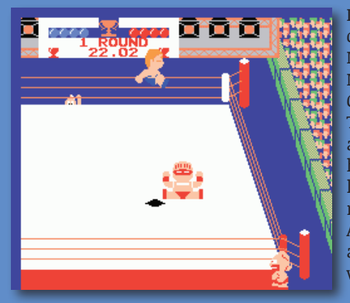
With the Nintendo Entertainment System revitalizing the video game market and dominating the late 1980s, it was not at all uncommon to see many video games based on licensed properties. And why not? Video games were a new way to target audiences, especially kids, and introduce them to characters or products. Everything from classic cartoons to hit movies got the video game treatment. Even Domino's Pizza jumped into it by licensing a video game starring their company mascot, the Noid. As video games grew increasingly popular throughout the decade, nothing was off the table when it came to potentially being turned into a video game... including toys.

Just a few short years before the NES saw release in the United States, it was against FCC regulations to produce cartoons based on a line of toys or action figures. Such cartoons were looked upon as extended commercials, advertising directly to children, and therefore inappropriate. But good ol' President Reagan changed all of that, and in 1985 we saw the debut of Hanna-Barbera's *The Pac-Man Show*. Pac-Man became the first video game mascot to receive an animated series. Shortly after that, *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe*, based on the line of action figures from Mattel, debuted to massive success. This was followed by a slew of new cartoons based on video games and toy lines, including the likes of *G.I. Joe* and *Transformers*.

So why is this important to the overall topic of toys-turned-video games? With new hit animated shows came a new level of brand awareness. Suddenly, kids were connecting with these characters on a whole new level which caused the demand for even more toys. It wasn't long until they wanted more than just the action figures. These kids craved t-shirts, lunchboxes, and yes, video games!

G.I. Joe is a terrific example of that. While G.I Joe was originally released in 1964, the modern "A Real American Hero" line was released in the U.S. in 1982. The toys themselves did well, but the introduction of the animated series in 1985 helped to thrust the brand into the limelight. Later, in 1991, Taxan released *G.I. Joe* on the NES. The game truly does an amazing job of capitalizing on the brand that had been built up over the previous decade by utilizing characters and vehicles from both the animated series and the Hasbro toy line. At this point, kids and fans were very familiar with characters such as General Hawk, Duke, and Snake Eyes and their battles against the evil Cobra organization. This game allowed those fans to fight the same battles they likely had with their 3.75" action figures, but this time with an NES controller.

While the game was released towards the end of the Nintendo's life span, its instantly recognizable characters and themes, as well as the overall fun gameplay, garnered decent reviews from fans and critics. The game even got a sequel from Capcom in 1992. Thus, this game is a perfect example of what the power of recognition due to a popular animated series and line of toys can do for the overall licensed property. Now how about an example of the opposite? Enter: *M.U.S.C.L.E.*



In 1985, Mattel released a line of small, pink wrestlers dubbed M.U.S.C.L.E. (which stands for Millions of Unusual Small Creatures Lurking Everywhere). The toy line was quite popular, and many children at the time had at least a handful of these little weirdos since they were relatively cheap. What many American kids did not realize at the time is that these figures were originally released in Japan two years earlier, and were based on an anime and manga franchise called *Kinnikuman*. *Kinnikuman* was popular in Japan, so along with the cartoon and manga series, Bandai released the video game *Kinnikuman: Massuru Taggu Matchi* for the Famicom in 1985. The following year, the game was brought to the NES in the U.S. and rebranded with the *M.U.S.C.L.E.* name.

Because American kids were completely unfamiliar with the characters outside of the little pink mini figures they collected, one can imagine that the connection with this game was not quite as strong as it might have been had the cartoons been available in the U.S. Of course, it also doesn't help that the game is not looked at as being very good. It's an early title for the system, and really suffers from limited graphics and poor controls. It's not really the best representation of the much-beloved toy line.

And that brings us to one of the most bizarre NES games based on a line of toys. Monster in My Pocket was a line of small, soft plastic figures very similar to M.U.S.C.L.E., but with a focus on classic monsters. Matchbox released the toy line in 1990 with no media initially surrounding the property. While there was a short-lived comic book series throughout 1991, the franchise really stepped up in 1992 with the release of an animated special from Hanna-Barbera and a brand new video game from Konami on the NES. This media push might have been a little too late, as 1992 was also the year that the toy line began to fade from U.S. store shelves. (The toys found much more success in the U.K.)

The game itself utilizes some of the story aspects from the comic book series that was released in 1991. However, most of the folks playing this game were likely mostly familiar with the line of toys, so this was their first real introduction to any sort of story for these characters. While the game has garnered many positive reviews, there's one extra charming thing about this specific title that is especially appealing to collectors of the toy line.

The game was packaged with an exclusive figure named Blemmyae, who was also featured in the artwork on the game box. The figure was offered in four different colors (green, pink, orange, and blue) and these color variations were randomly inserted into the game boxes. This is the only way this particular figure was ever released, making him a really nice bonus incentive for buying the game. As one can imagine, the Blemmyae figure is quite sought after these days. With Monster in my Pocket collectors and Nintendo collectors all after him to complete their collections, this one mini figure now sells for upwards of $100 on internet auction sites!

Many of the toy properties that hit big in the 1980s like G.I. Joe are still well-known to this day. Cartoons, comic books, and other forms of media played a huge role in making these toys more than just a random piece of plastic that gave us enjoyment as kids. They became much more than that and the NES played its role by giving us the ability to act out our adventures with our favorite characters in a colorful, 8-bit world.

"Pixel Dan" Eardley is a reviewer, reporter, and all-around toy enthusiast. He is well known for his fun and charismatic toy and action figure video reviews on YouTube, as well as his toy industry interviews.

The *Dragon Warrior* Giveaway

by Pat Contri

In August 1989, Nintendo released the RPG *Dragon Warrior* in North America. It wasn't an insignificant release, since in Japan *Dragon Quest* (renamed *Dragon Warrior* state-side) was a huge franchise with the third installment already being developed. Nintendo assumed that since it was a smash hit in Japan that it would likewise be in the U.S. That assumption wasn't exactly correct and it didn't sell well for a good reason – the RPG genre was almost unheard of on consoles in North America. Sure, on computers throughout the early and mid 80s you had many RPG releases such as the *Ultima*, *Wizardry*, and *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* games, but console gaming had an entirely different audience, with an entirely different demographic than computer users – mostly younger kids. This was a type of gamer that had never heard of role-playing games before. They were too busy with their *Super Marios* and their *Contras* and their *Adventures of Bayou Billies*.

If Nintendo did not realize this fact before its release in North America, it must have been crystal clear after *Dragon Warrior*'s release and subsequent substandard sales in 1989 that NES gamers not ready for nor familiar with the RPG genre. *Nintendo Power* magazine pumping out coverage of the game in various issues during 1989 didn't seem to help matters either. So what was Nintendo to do about a successful franchise in Japan that wasn't up to snuff in the U.S., as well as thousands upon thousands of unsold *Dragon Warrior* games? How about a giveaway?!

In the fall of 1990, Nintendo of America unleashed a monumental giveaway to the gaming public; a **free** copy of *Dragon Warrior* was mailed to anyone who subscribed or re-subscribed to *Nintendo Power* magazine. A free game giveaway to this extent was unheard of, and given the fact that a new NES game usually cost at least $40 and the magazine subscription was about half of that, it was no surprise that hundreds of thousands of gamers (or their parents) cashed in and were introduced to the RPG genre via a free copy of the game. And indeed, it was how I was introduced to *Dragon Warrior* and RPGs as well. Wow, a free game! I mean, my Mom once bought me a new copy of *Jaws* for next to nothing at a flea market across from New Jersey State Prison, but this was even better!

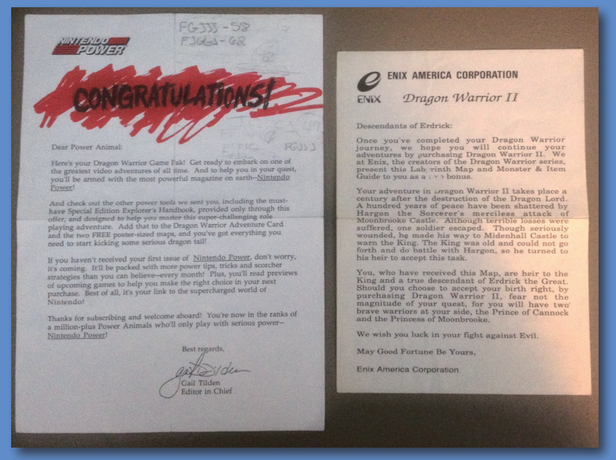
Since this was Nintendo's first real chance to indoctrinate the Western console audience into the world of RPGs, they had to make sure that it stuck. If not, that meant that RPGs might never catch on with the youngsters, and then future games like *Final Fantasy* and *Earthbound* would crash and burn in the U.S. In order to avoid this, Nintendo of America held the hand of every gamer by not only sending them the game but also a bevy of bonus, supplemental *Dragon Warrior* material to make sure gamers not only understood the type of game they were seeing, but would transition into and learn the RPG genre as smoothly as possible. It wasn't exactly a "soft sell." So what was included in the package that was mailed out to hundreds of thousands?

Congratulations Letter from Nintendo Power

In this letter, Nintendo thanked you for subscribing and gave you a heads-up concerning all the other materials contained in the package. It's strangely addressed to you as a "Power Animal," which sounds like an aggressive overcompensation for the slower and inaction-packed game *Dragon Warrior*. Hey, Nintendo of America marketing team, let's pump the brakes a bit.

Dragon Warrior II Letter from Enix America

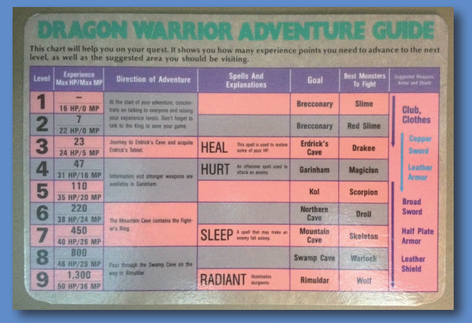
This letter from the publisher of the sequel conveniently let players know that once they slogged through 50 hours of killing slimes for experience points, the sequel game was available (it was released Dec. 1990). While I applaud Enix of America's confidence here, it comes across more like a desperate love letter from someone you went on one awkward date with who's already planning to elope.



The letters. The one from Enix America is almost as creepy as one from the Zodiac Killer.

Dragon Warrior Adventure Guide Card

This pastel-colored card spelled out the various player experience levels in the game, including not only the suggested weapons, items, and spells the player should have by that point, but also where in the game they should be headed. This "cheat-sheet" for the game was helpful for those too lazy to attempt to think on their own. After all, these were gamers who couldn't beat *Contra* without the Konami Code, right?



The Adventure Guide card – not to be confused with an invitation to your sister's wedding.

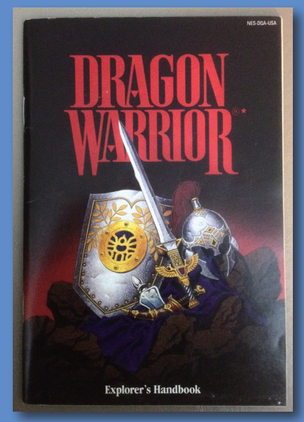
Overworld / Monster Identification Map and Dungeon Maps Posters

These oversized maps spelled out the stats of the monsters in *Dragon Warrior*, laid out the world for the player to explore, and detailed the underworld dungeons the player had to traverse in order to find items, spells, and other RPG goodies that usually pop out of blocks or dead enemies in other games. These posters would prove to be helpful and totally essential by themselves, if it wasn't for the–

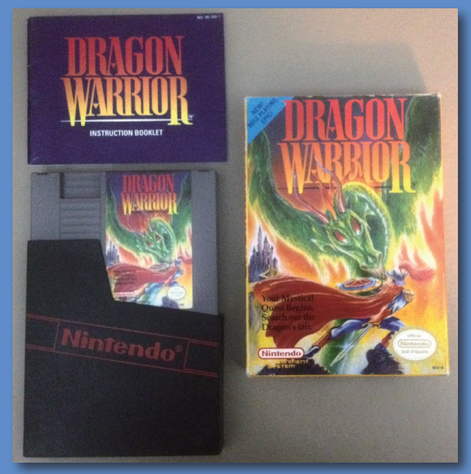
Explorer's Handbook

If all the other items weren't enough to get players on their way and tie their shoes, Nintendo printed up and included a 64-page step-by-step walkthrough that detailed everything you could possibly want to know about the game and playing through it while pulling you along on a leash. If Nintendo's distrust in Western gamers' attention span and ability to care/adapt to role-playing games wasn't apparent enough, the Explorer's Handbook made it loud and clear.

The posters. Hanging one in your high school locker increased the likelihood of wedgies by 65%.



The Explorer's Handbook – as long as and exhaustive as a reference guide to a 1972 Ford Ranchero, but at least this one tells you where to buy Magic Armor!

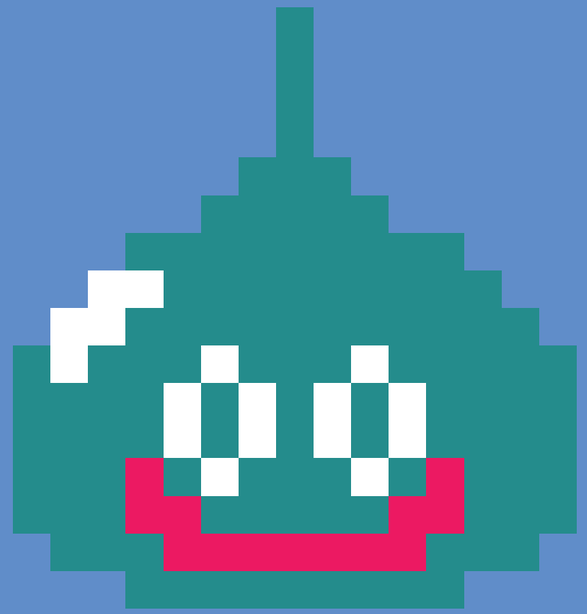


The game... oh yeah, this thing. I hear you wrestle dragons and punch slimes and stuff.

The entire contents of the giveaway package. The only thing missing is a "I Only Own Dragon Warrior Because I Got It For Free" t-shirt.

There you have it – Nintendo's grand *Dragon Warrior* giveaway experiment. It was an obvious hard sell and a somewhat desperate one, but did it pay off? While it did not lead to substantial sales for the sequels in the *Dragon Warrior* series on the NES (the pleading Enix America letters were ignored), the plethora of free games at least helped establish the RPG genre more firmly in North America for console gamers, which paved the way for the future success of various other RPGs to follow suit. This would be the last free NES game giveaway via *Nintendo Power*, which is a shame, since there were only so many prison flea markets with questionably cheap NES games I could count on as a child.

Pat Contri is a tomfoolery practitioner and famous devourer of brownie sundaes. He is also responsible for creating Ultimate Nintendo: Guide to the NES Library (1985-1995), available now!



Why Was Music So Good on the NES?

by Brent Black

"If Beethoven were alive today, make no mistake, he'd be a video game composer. Abso-freaking-lutely." – Tommy Tallarico, Guinness World Record holder, most prolific video game composer of all time

The library of NES games contains some of the best music ever written. I mean some of the best music since music was invented. I'm talking some of the best music

OF.

ALL.

TIME.

That might seem like an exaggeration, but it's not.

I'd be willing to bet that, worldwide, the single most identifiable tune is the *Super Mario Bros.* one. You know the one I mean…

"Bah dat dat, doo-dat dow"?

It's so identifiable, I've jogged your memory of the song just by writing a string of vaguely suggestive syllables in a *print medium*.

On YouTube alone, you can find the *Super Mario Bros.* "Overworld Theme" performed by:

pianists,

guitarists,

a CNC router,

a pipe organist,

ocarina soloists,

marching bands,

a cappella choirs,

a pair of Tesla coils,

a beatboxing flautist,

symphonic orchestras,

a boy flicking his cheek,

an ancient Chinese Shēng,

a collection of stepper motors,

a collection of floppy disk drives,

a man rubbing tuned wine glasses,

a manualist (literally a musically inclined hand-farter),

all manner of woodwind, brass and string instrument soloists,

a remote control car striking a line of perfectly tuned wine bottles,

and that's just what you find in the first few minutes of a perfunctory YouTube search! It's arguably as ubiquitously identifiable in the developed world as any country's national anthem, any piece of classical music, or any iconic film score. Sure, a child in one of these countries may sense a passing familiarity with the notes of Mozart's "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik", or John Williams' main theme from *Superman*, but could they name them? For that matter, could most adults name them off-hand? On the other hand, after a few seconds into Koji Kondo's 1985 masterpiece, pretty much anyone can tell you it's the Mario tune.

Why? What are the root causes – or the necessary conditions – to create such a renowned tune?

If you ask me, it all grows out of extreme creative limitation. Orson Welles once said "The absence of limitation is the enemy of art." In other words, some of the best creative works spring from artists who must work within tight parameters and limited resources.

Case in point: The NES sound chip.

The NES sound chip has a maximum polyphony of three notes plus one track of non-melodic sound, and another track for sampling. In layman's terms, that means it can usually only play three notes of music at a time, with two other tracks set aside for percussion and sound effects. Technically, that sound effects track could be used for music, but this trick was only used in a minority of NES titles, and would still only allow four notes of music to be played at once. For comparison, a symphonic orchestra can perform over sixty notes simultaneously. A four-piece rock band could play around a dozen at a time. Even a super-skilled xylophone player can get five or six going at once! But the humble NES sound chip, even when stretched to the limit, could only produce four at a time.

On top of that, NES carts had very limited data capacity, so most of the tunes NES players heard were less than a minute long, though they may have seemed longer because they were typically looped ad infinitum. Legendary composer Koji Kondo was particularly clever with the *Super Mario Bros.* "Overworld Theme", which only contained about 40 seconds of musical material, but was broken up into four sections that were rearranged in different orders to create a longer loop. Think about that: a kid who played *Super Mario Bros.* on the NES could easily have listened to fifteen collective hours of the "Overworld Theme", even though the tune only has 40 actual seconds of musical material.

So an average NES composer was faced with the assignment of writing a piece of music that would be less than a minute long – with the polyphonic equivalent of a three-fingered pianist and a bongo player – the constant repetition of which needed to be tolerated by players for hours on end. The NES was one of the most advanced pieces of consumer-level technology ever created, and yet its sound chip set composers back to a time when music itself was in its infancy.

What does a composer do when faced with such a ridiculous assignment? The composers of the most memorable NES soundtracks broke music down to its essentials: simple melody and harmony.

The sound chip's limited polyphony made complex chords nigh impossible, so simpler chord structures emerged. And the time limits on most of the tunes nudged composers toward tidy, catchy bricks of music, nearly as densely packed as a jingle on a 30-second TV commercial.

Some composers, like Tim Follin (*Solstice*, *Silver Surfer*) found clever ways to manipulate the hardware into playing more complicated arrangements than those for which it was designed. Unfortunately, the games he composed for were often critical bombs or otherwise unpopular. However, because of his adroit composition skills, NES games like *Pictionary*, *Silver Surfer*, and *Solstice* are remembered today almost entirely for his compositions on their soundtracks.

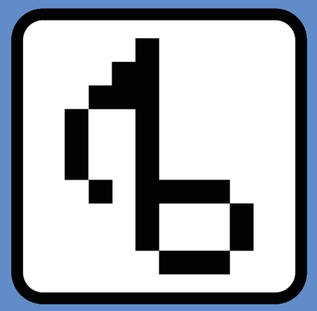
There were other techniques that squeezed extra complexity out of the NES sound chip, such as the "arpeggio effect". When a pianist plays a chord, we hear all the notes in that chord at the same time. A complex chord can easily contain eight or more distinct notes. By playing a chord's notes in an arpeggio – a sequence of notes rather than all of them playing at once – NES composers could trick the ear of the listener into thinking they were hearing one chord all at once, when in fact it was still just one very short note at a time. This technique dated back to the Commodore 64 and was arguably perfected during the NES generation.

Even with the aforementioned tricks and workarounds, the amount of sound that the NES could produce was still extremely finite. Timbral variety couldn't pull much weight, nor could extreme variations in dynamics; it just had to be damn good music that expressed itself in a very short length of time.

Little did these composers know that they weren't just writing tunes for a new medium; they were on the frontier of a new genre of music. Think about it: All music up until the emergence of video game music was either actively performed by a musician, or passively received by a listener. Even if you were watching an opera, the music was about the journey of the characters on stage. But a game tune is the music of the player's journey. Even if millions of individual players had unique versions of this journey, they still experienced the same music, and they only experienced it because of their constant choice to actively pursue the journey of the game. And while video game music could mimic any genre – NES titles had music in every style from Baroque to Bluegrass – it is fundamentally distinct in its context and function from any other type of music that existed before. The years that followed after the NES saw the rise of more complex sound chips and, eventually, more advanced consoles could just cue up pre-recorded sound files and forgo a limited sound chip altogether. One could argue that video game music is less lyrical these days; catchy tunes are fewer and farther between, having been replaced by ambient soundscapes and moody orchestral music, often barely distinguishable from a generic Apple loop.

But before all that, there were frustratingly restrictive sound chips and clever, tech-savvy composers. The NES was in many ways the apex of those programmer-meets-composer hybrids, and one of their greatest achievements is the enthusiasm that remains for their work decades later. Orchestras around the world play symphonic arrangements of game themes from the NES era to sold-out houses and screaming fans. Popular video game conventions like MAGFest and PAX give primetime slots to bands who simply play covers of video game tunes from the 8-bit era. These are all testaments to the potency that music can have when it grows out of limited parameters, and the power of video game music: a distinct and important genre that came of age through the groundbreaking reign of the NES.

Brent Black is known as "Brentalfloss" on YouTube where he has been adding lyrics to classic video game tunes and releasing related music videos since 2008. His albums of "Video Games With Lyrics" songs have placed in the top ten on the iTunes and Billboard comedy charts. You can follow his increasingly strange career on Twitter: @brentalfloss.



Color Dreams and Wisdom Tree

by Karen Niemla

Wisdom Tree is arguably the best known religious video game publisher of all time, indeed, even to this day. However, this fame is partially infamy, since that distinction might be owed to circumstance as much as the company's laboring and innovation. Regardless, the story of Wisdom Tree's existence exemplifies the complexities of Nintendo's licensing and business practices as well as the challenges inherent in creating games with Christian themes.

Born around 1988, Wisdom Tree's Christian name was actually "Color Dreams," and the company was focused on making general-interest unlicensed games for the NES. Strangely, these games were as violent as other ordinary NES games, with titles like *RoboDemons* featuring undead creatures in graveyards and *Menace Beach* containing a woman whose clothes fall off more and more as the player progresses. One of their abandoned projects was even an adaptation of the *Hellraiser* films. They also published the infamous *Master Chu and the Drunkard Hu* (developed elsewhere), and made a strange shooter game called *Baby Boomer*.

The games weren't selling well enough, however, firstly because they weren't particularly good, and secondly because of Nintendo's licensing and business practices. The video game crash that preceded Nintendo's arrival in America had been caused in part by a flood of gaming systems and cartridges with dubious quality and intentions. The "Nintendo Seal of Quality" branded on NES game boxes was an assurance to the public that the system's software was (generally) not garbage and not offensive. Yet this also meant that they ultimately controlled what gaming could and could not achieve. Nintendo's censorship did later become problematic for its image in the 16-bit wars when Sega was more willing to release "edgy" titles and Nintendo wished to remain constitutionally family-friendly.

Nintendo enforced the licensing through both the NES hardware and retailers. Nintendo wouldn't allow major video game stores to sell unlicensed games, they limited the number of titles each publisher could release in a year, mandated pricing, and employed other such practices, both legal and illegal. In this environment, Color Dreams had nowhere to sell their games. So they sought a new market out of Nintendo's jurisdiction: Christian bookstores. Religious themes were verboten under Nintendo's licensing, so there were no other developers making Christian games in traditional video game and toy stores. These bookstores also sold Christian-themed videos, decor, music, accessories, jewelry, fish car emblems, etc. NES carts would just be one more thing.

Thus Color Dreams became Wisdom Tree, yet it still remained the same, since several Color Dreams games were retooled and re-titled to contain Christian themes while remaining otherwise identical. With tenuous Biblical connections added, *Menace Beach* became *Sunday Funday* and *Crystal Mines* became *Exodus*. Interestingly, *Sunday Funday* was made in 1995 and is the last NES game released during the system's lifetime. Yet Wisdom Tree's best known games are those which they made with the Christian audience in mind such as *King of Kings*, *Bible Adventures*, and *Spiritual Warfare* on the NES. None of these games were especially great in terms of gameplay and borrowed heavily from other games, but they were unique and that brought them success. They also made ports of these games for the Genesis and Game Boy. Various Christian games are still being made and played, but none of them seem to have received the same recognition as the Wisdom Tree titles. Why?

The NES' popularity may be part of the reason, but perhaps religious video games and fiction in general are limited by the source material inherently. The writer has to, in a way, write God as a character through His actions and inactions. Considering that He's omnipotent, your audience might wonder why He doesn't just literally deus ex machina all the plot's problems away. Putting Biblical characters in a game introduces the possibility that the player can lose, which is supposed to be impossible, an ending where God's intended outcome did not happen. Why doesn't God just give us Game Genie powers in the game, if He's so powerful? Why doesn't He do that for us in real life, if He's so powerful? It takes some bravery/arrogance for a writer to put God in fiction with sincerity not only because it's the biggest can of worms you can touch, but it's also awkward to demonstrate who this "God" character is when you're the one in control and accountable.

Besides that, there are even the doctrinal questions of whether or not games are an acceptable medium for Christian stories. Some denominations do not accept contemporary Christian music in worship, and some believe reading Harry Potter is immoral because it involves magic. Over the years the Christian church has had multiple schisms into umpteen denominations over varying opinions concerning what is proper or improper to do with The Bible. Some people regard religious texts with reverence and dignity in that they serve as a portal to a world beyond our own and to the past, and even those who do not believe may hold a serious scholarly respect for the millennia of culture and history within these texts. How well you accept the ideas of any Christian game depends on how accepting you are of fiction as an idea and how good you are at separating facts from reality – which is difficult when you're talking about concepts that literally exist in another reality.

Yet the folks at Wisdom Tree in the 1990s got beyond these profound questions... by not even asking or answering them at all. They just didn't care. Paradoxically, this was their greatest strength. They had the courage to not care, and in doing so they were able to make Christian games uninhibited by Christianity itself, Nintendo, and reason. The insanity in these games is what made them memorable and fun. Take the Nile River stages from *Bible Adventures* for example: You're Moses' birth mother (Jochebed) carrying baby Moses down an Egyptian riverbank with spring-loaded platforms, guards, corporeal clouds, and giant spiders. She has super speed and super strength, able to lift over her head adult men and piles of objects. The baby is frequently dropped or thrown on the ground as you fight your way to the level's end. Everything on screen is nonsense, even more so compared to scripture, yet we can accept it because it's an NES game.

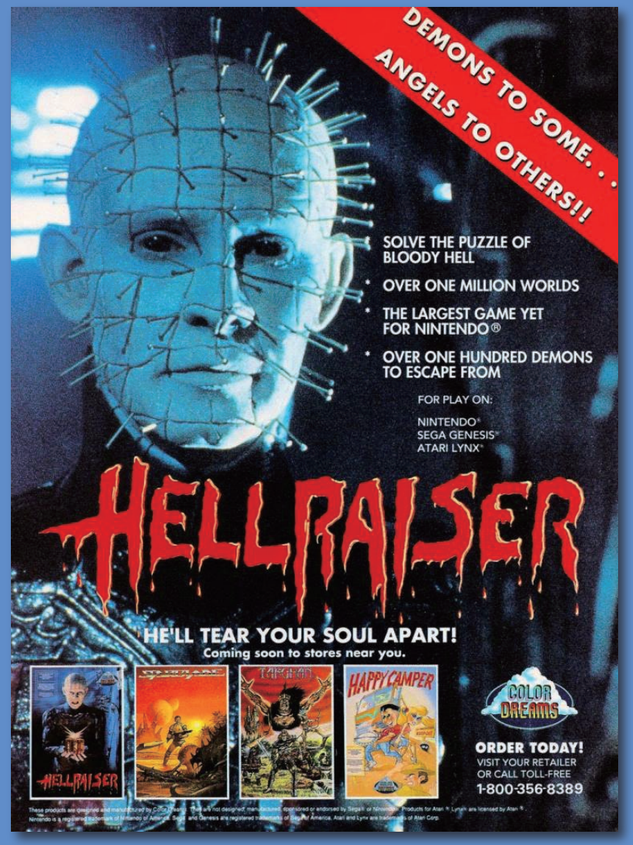
Wisdom Tree's best game, *Spiritual Warfare*, is also their craziest, with regard for neither Nintendo's list of no-no's nor the subtleties involved with Biblical interpretation. It's a *Legend of Zelda*-inspired action-adventure game in which demons have taken over a town and possessed its inhabitants. You fight enemies by throwing holy fruits at them which cause them to kneel in prayer. Demons burst from some people, and the game ends in a Hell-like demon fortress complete with devils.

You must save the world from the forces of evil, which is typical of video games but with one big difference: to varying degrees, some Christians believe in that battle literally. Not all faiths and not all Christian denominations have the evangelical element, where converting and "saving" people is paramount, but this game was probably made for that audience. Hare Krishnas are included at the airport as enemies, and you have to convert them too, which is uncomfortable. For most average players, demonry is a common video game trope, but to some people, demons are 100% real and can possess and corrupt people, while other Christians don't believe in literal demons and see them as a representation of evil. If you Google the phrase "Spiritual Warfare," you'll see a lot of web pages taking it very seriously, believing that our world is constantly at war with evil, metaphorically and literally.

Yet not all denominations have that embattled, aggressive attitude, and there are some more universal scriptural and moral lessons in the game. If you enter a bar or a casino you are punished, and some of the enemies you fight are drunks (with bottles in hand) or street gangs. The "Armor of God" in Ephesians 6:10–18 is a metaphor enumerating various virtues that Christians should use to stand against evil in the world, including the "breastplate of righteousness," the "belt of truth," and other armors mentioned in the game. It's the same for the Fruits of the Spirit weapons in Galatians 5:22-23 (no mention of throwing them at people). The special item "Samson's Jawbone," which is used in the game only as a means to retrieve out-of-reach items, is a legendary weapon in the Bible from Judges 15:16, where the semi-mythological superhero Samson fights off an enemy army singlehandedly: "'With the jawbone of a donkey, I've piled them in heaps! With the jawbone of a donkey, I've killed a thousand men!'" (Why not make a game out of that?) The "Vials of God's Wrath" in Revelation 16:1 cause plagues to punish the wicked, though in the game they are explosive grenades. Finally, *Spiritual Warfare* and all other Wisdom Tree NES games include multiple choice scripture quizzes, usually awarding health or power-ups. At the very least, *Spiritual Warfare* can help players remember parts of the Bible.

Since it's fairly enjoyable on its own, you don't have to be a religious person to enjoy *Spiritual Warfare* and may treat it like regular fiction, which actually makes the game much more sensible: you fight demons using divine powers, and that's that. The other Wisdom Tree games are notable NES oddities which aren't great (or good) but still have some charm. Again, that charm comes from their outlandish execution and respectfully irreverent treatment of religious ideas. Sometimes, you don't have to be great to be a legend.

Karen Niemla grew up in Pennsylvania and enjoys vintage computers, retro gaming, drawing, and writing. Currently she is a reference librarian at The University of Louisiana at Monroe and Web Administrator for the Association of College & Research Libraries Louisiana Chapter.



The Licensed Property NES Game Addiction

by Andre Meadows

As a fan of technology, it still fascinates me that today you have a screen everywhere to watch something. TVs, computers, tablets, cell phones… some of you may be reading this book right now on an electronic device. It's okay. Pat doesn't mind. You still bought his book. Unless this is a pirated copy, which in that case, shame on you! Pat gots to get paid, son. Keeping that beautiful hair of his that bouncy don't come cheap! Where was I? Oh yes, screens to watch everywhere.

I mention this because when I think about all the nostalgia talk you see lately ("Remember the '80s? Are you a '90s kid? Top 10 Discontinued Food from your Childhood!"), I always go back and think about how I grew up for several years in a household with only one TV. One. Eventually, I was "mature" enough to have a TV in my own room (in other words, my parents bought a new TV, so I got the old one). But before that, it was one TV to rule us all. And my parents dominated the TV. If they were home, they had control and I had to be lucky enough to be interested in whatever they wanted to watch.

Except on Saturday morning.

Saturday morning was my time. My precious few hours where I had total control of the television set. To take in the sweet cartoon choices that CBS, NBC, ABC (and eventually FOX and the WB) could provide. If I was lucky, I could also go to a friend's house or finish my homework in time to catch some syndicated cartoons and sitcoms on weekday afternoons. And thanks to cable, I occasionally got to experience *Tom and Jerry's Funhouse* on TBS, *Donald Duck Presents* on The Disney Channel, whatever was on Nickelodeon, TNT Toons and USA Cartoon Express. This is why cartoons, sitcoms, and cheesy movies mean so much to me to this day. It was the indicator that I had control of entertainment – to watch the things my parents never would have chosen.

That choice was both good and bad when it comes to the NES. Sure, Nintendo had a library of unique games, original characters, and brand new worlds to explore. But it wasn't long before companies exploited the NES with a time-honored tradition: making video games based on established characters and licensed properties (movie, TV show, cartoon, comic book, etc.). If a kid likes WATCHING FOX's *Peter Pan and the Pirates*, clearly they would like PLAYING FOX's *Peter Pan and the Pirates*. Love *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure*? Then you obviously gotta get *Bill & Ted's Excellent Video Game Adventure*! Who cares if the video game is almost completely unplayable? IT'S GOT BILL & TED ON THE COVER! WYLD STALLIONS RULE for only $49.99! Have we learned nothing from the *E.T.* video game and the crash of 1983? Never forget.

Many NES games based on licensed properties weren't well made nor cared about. They were overpriced, full of glitches, and sometimes hardly even based on the properties they were named after. They were just acquired licenses slapped on rushed video games, thrown in stores with the movie poster or character assets on the cover, so that some idiot would buy and play the games simply based on the name alone.

And I was that idiot.

Because of my near drug-like addiction to watching cartoons, sitcoms, and family flicks whenever I had control of the TV or VCR, it wasn't long before Nintendo made me crave the same thing. On top of that, I rented games more than I bought them. It's hard to convince Mom and Dad to buy a $50 video game, but it's easier to use my allowance to rent a game from Blockbuster Video (or Action Video, the local movie and game rental chain in my neighborhood before Blockbuster Video placed their stores literally across the street from all the Action Videos and put them out of business – karma, Blockbuster).

Video stores had plenty of these licensed games on the shelves. The good games were usually rented out, and these types of games were left behind. Or maybe they had more games based on movies and TV shows because they also rented videos. Who knows? All I know is they were there and I always got them. No need for *Mega Man* or *Metal Gear*. Step aside *Castlevania* and *Contra*. I'm good with *Fester's Quest*. One thing I personally loved doing was making a theme night or weekend for myself. I would rent a movie and rent the video game based on the movie at the same time, like *Beetlejuice* or *Dick Tracy*. Obviously, I was a fun kid to hang out with back in the day.

So instead of mastering *The Legend of Zelda* or *Metroid*, here's a sampling of video games I played as a kid, solely because they were based on properties I loved. I'll let you personally decide the quality of each game. *Who Framed Roger Rabbit? Tom and Jerry. Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Mickey Mousecapade. The Ren & Stimpy Show: Buckaroo$. Home Alone. Ghostbusters. Ghostbusters II. The Simpsons: Bart vs. the Space Mutants. The Simpsons: Bart vs. the World. Harlem Globetrotters. Yo! Noid. M.C. Kids. Monopoly. The Flintstones: The Rescue of Dino & Hoppy* (complete with a George Jetson cameo). If it was based on a game show, it was a guaranteed playthrough. *Jeopardy! Wheel of Fortune. Family Feud. Fun House. Win, Lose or Draw. Hollywood Squares*. Played them all. And in cases that made absolutely no sense, I sometimes played games based on movies BEFORE ever watching the actual movies they were based on. My apologies to *Back to the Future* and *RoboCop*.

My first time going to Disneyland was in high school, when I won a trip to Los Angeles for a school essay contest. But my REAL first time going to Disneyland was playing *Adventures in the Magic Kingdom* on the NES. And I'm sure many of you have seen the Angry Video Game Nerd fight Bugs Bunny in his videos. Well, I rented *The Bugs Bunny Birthday Blowout* and I owned *The Bugs Bunny Crazy Castle*. You read right. Owned. And when stores first started selling used NES games, what classics did I buy? *The Three Stooges, Double Dare, Remote Control* and *Jackie Chan's Action Kung Fu*.

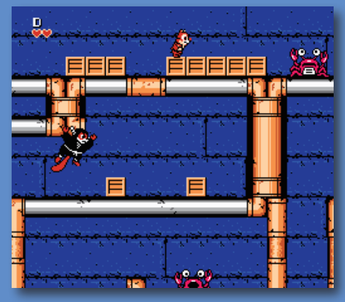
There was just something that intrigued me about a video game version of a movie, TV show, or cartoon. And yet, for some reason, I missed out on *Goonies II*. Go figure. But there are some rare gems that made the journey all worth it. I mean, technically *Punch-Out!!* started out as a licensed game, *Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!!* That counts, right? It's no *Magic Johnson's Fast Break* or *Lee Trevino's Fighting Golf*, but the game seems to have done well for itself. And then there's *Popeye*. I personally played *Popeye* on the Texas Instruments TI-99/4A (NERRRRD!!!!), but it was one of the first games on the NES and I still love that simple *Donkey Kong*-like platformer with the classic Miyamoto touch.

Remember how I said I used to rent a movie and the video game based on that movie at the same time? One weekend, I did that with a film that would soon become one of my favorite movies of all time and a really great movie-to-video game adaptation, *Gremlins 2: The New Batch*. I love that movie as much as Gremlins love water, and even though the *Gremlins 2* game was hard for me to play sometimes (I could never get past Machine Gun Mohawk), it was still enjoyable having Gizmo shoot paper clips and flaming pencils at George, Lenny, Daffy, and their Gremlin friends.

I will always have a soft spot for the animated series *Tiny Toon Adventures*, and I also enjoyed its NES counterpart. The Tiny Toons NES game is *Super Mario Bros. 3*. Like seriously, it is. It was such a fun game that I enjoyed renting as a child and owning as an adult. As I kid, I also rented the sequel, *Tiny Toon Adventures 2: Trouble in Wackyland*. But I actually owned *Tiny Toon Adventures Cartoon Workshop*, where you could use locations and character animations to make your own "tiny" cartoons starring Buster and Babs Bunny (no relation), Plucky Duck, Furrball, even Calamity Coyote and Little Beeper. It was during my *Mario Paint* phase.

One of my favorite arcade memories was playing *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. My crowning achievement was using all of my tokens to beat it, all thanks to the Putt-Putt Golf & Games "Super Saturday Special." So I was beyond ecstatic when *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles II: The Arcade Game* was announced and shouted "Cowabunga!" when I got the game for Christmas. Today, it's obvious that the NES graphics can't compare to the arcade original. But that Christmas and beyond, it was like I brought the arcade machine home. Sure, it was only two players instead of four, but who cared? The first game only had one player for four Turtles! And Konami was even kind enough to add new levels, new characters, and product placement. Yes, I did use the Pizza Hut coupon from the game manual.

That same Christmas, I also got *Chip 'n Dale Rescue Rangers*. While everyone else loves that other cartoon and video game that you know is about to be mentioned, I was a huge fan of Chip, Dale, Monterey Jack, Gadget, and Zipper. Rescue Rangers away! I loved the cartoon and I loved the video game. It had the look and the feel of the cartoon, something Capcom did an excellent job of doing with Disney games like *The Little Mermaid, Darkwing Duck*, and… that other game.



Rescue Rangers, like *Ninja Turtles II*, was for two players, so a friend and I could work together as Chip 'n Dale, throwing apples and boxes to defeat Fat Cat and his goons while getting Monty some cheese. I even used *Rescue Rangers* and *Ninja Turtles II* as part of a school science experiment to prove if video games can be completed faster with two-player co-op mode versus one player. I got a "C" on the project. My teacher liked the concept, but was disappointed that I chose to fill my science project board with images of Ninja Turtles and Rescue Rangers I cut out of my *Nintendo Power* magazines, leaving only one small sheet of paper with all of my scientific data. My classmates loved it though. The following year I did an experiment about how high different types of balls can bounce. That got me to the city science fair regionals. I'll never understand science.

But enough about that, let's get to the pinnacle of cartoon-turned-video game, and that's *DuckTales*. Did you just say "woo-ooh" after reading the title? I know I did. *DuckTales* (woo-ooh) was also a Christmas present and one of my favorite NES games of all time. Honestly, there's times I think I like the game more than the cartoon. It's that good. There's a reason that it got remastered. Well, that and nostalgia. But you do have to appreciate *DuckTales Remastered* looking even more like the cartoon and adding most of the voice cast.

But what makes the original *DuckTales* on the NES so great? It had Capcom and Disney working together, and used the *Mega Man* engine and some of its key developers to make its adaptation perfection. You play as Scrooge McDuck, searching exotic locations for diamonds, ice cream(?), and special treasures just like on the cartoon show. And so many characters from the cartoon appear in the video game. You'll see Huey, Dewey, Louie, Webby, Launchpad McQuack, Mrs. Beakley, the Beagle Boys, Flintheart Glomgold, Magica De Spell, Gyro Gearloose, Bubba Duck – even GizmoDuck! Blathering Blatherskite!

DuckTales on the NES also gave Scrooge McDuck the ultimate weapon – his cane. No gun, no fireballs, no ninja throwing stars – just smacking enemies, opening treasure chests, and bouncing around like a pogo stick, all on his cane. This actually created a variety of gameplay. Do I pogo bounce off my enemies or wait for the right moment to golf swing a rock at them? Do I bounce across the spikes on the ground or climb the vines above them? I want to pogo on top of a bunny or goat in the Himalaya level, but if I miss, I get stuck in the snow. Do I pay the statue in the Amazon level to reach the vine or do I trick an enemy to follow me and then pogo off his head? Personally, I hope you choose the latter and save yourself $300,000.

And the music! Many people love to mention the Moon stage theme, but honestly I thought all of the music in *DuckTales* was great and conveyed the feeling you were playing a cartoon. The Transylvania theme was spooky and the African Mines theme was… African Mine-y? Play the Amazon or Himalayas theme and see if your toes don't start a-tappin'. *DuckTales* even had different endings which made you want to replay it over and over again, searching for missing treasures or playing different difficulty levels. I'm still learning more about this game today. I literally found out recently that there's a "bad ending" if you beat the game with no money! These seem like simple game mechanics, but considering that the game could have been slapped together and thrown out there in the style of *Hudson Hawk, Rocky and Bullwinkle* or *Where's Waldo?*, *DuckTales* is practically a revolution in gaming.

The Christmas break after receiving *DuckTales*, I was invited to a holiday sleepover, and I asked my parents if I could take my video game presents with me. They said I was allowed to take only one game. So I chose *DuckTales* over the other game I got for Christmas that year – *The Bugs Bunny Crazy Castle*.

Well, that's enough out of me. As Porky Pig would say, "Th-Th-Th-That's All Folks!" Unless Pat decides to do a Super Nintendo book. If that happens, then I can talk about how I played *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles IV: Turtles in Time* and *Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers*… also *Bebe's Kids, Michael Jordan: Chaos in the Windy City*, and *Looney Tunes B-Ball*.

I have a problem.

Andre Meadows is the creator of Black Nerd Comedy, the internet show discussing Power Rangers, Ninja Turtles, Nintendo, and lots of other '80s and '90s goodness. You can find him on Twitter @BlackNerd.

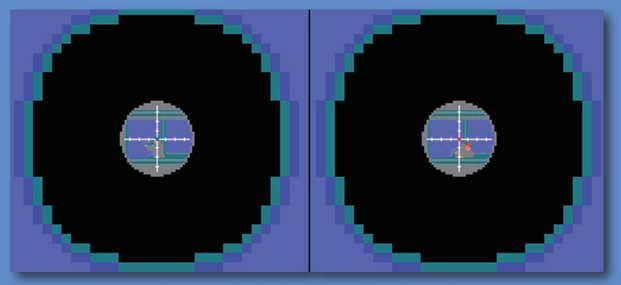
NES Censorship Hypocrisy

by Pat Contri

The heralded NES "Seal of Approval": the golden symbol meant to separate the licensed from the unlicensed games, the good from the bad, the marketable from the shunned. If you were a game publisher and wanted your NES title on Toys "R" Us and/or Kay Bee Toy Store shelves, you had to go through Nintendo of America in order to obtain that coveted seal and not be stuck in perpetual obscurity next to other unlicensed game gems such as *Tagin' Dragon* and *Wally Bear and the No! Gang*. While the legality of Nintendo's "our way or the highway" licensing program was questioned (Nintendo was successfully sued over this and other related practices), that didn't stop them from keeping a close eye on the software published on the NES. The "Seal of Approval" was meant to act as a buffer both for the quality of the game published as well as the content contained therein. The quality safety net Nintendo of America intended did not always exactly work out as planned (*Deadly Towers*, anyone?). Bad licensed games aside: it was NOA's censorship rules which were even more perplexing. Nintendo of America was notorious for screening out religious, political, and adult content (graphic violence, sexuality, etc.). However, we are about to see that Nintendo's censorship policies weren't exactly easy to predict, nor were they even close to consistent.

Gratuitous/Excessive Violence

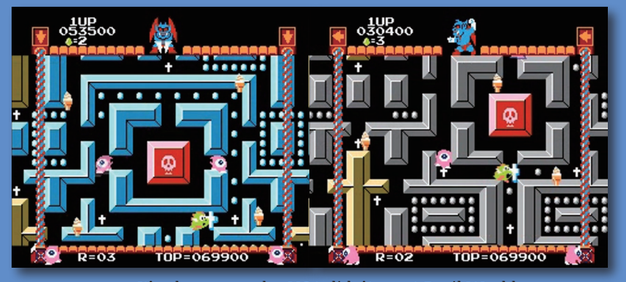
In theory, Nintendo of America thought they could filter out violent content mostly be never referring to death or killing as such in text, but rather by "defeating" the enemy. This strategy worked extremely well for most games, especially in *Friday the 13th* when Jason "defeats" children by hacking off their limbs with a machete. I also feel I've accomplished a great deal as a gamer when I've "defeated" an enemy sniper in *Top Secret Episode* by putting a bullet through their head. Speaking of Golgo 13, in order to soften his assassin image, he was only referred to as a "spy" in game materials and *Nintendo Power* magazine, yet the only spying he was doing was in female spy Cherry Grace's pants. HI-OOOOO!



Don't worry kids, that's not blood spurting out of that guy's head – it's cherry Juicy Juice!

Religious Symbolism

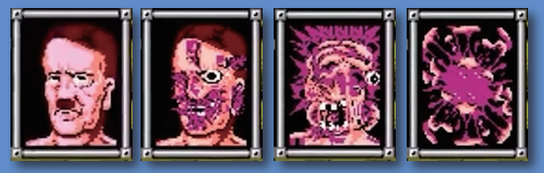
No civilized person likes to be reminded of religion (who wants to make dinner conversation uncomfortable?), and Nintendo of America agreed by heavily restricting religious images/themes. *Devil World* was a PAL/JAP region release featuring heavy Christian symbolism such as bibles, crosses and egg-men, so there was no way that game was being released state-side lest NOA add confession booths to their PowerFest 1990 tour. In another blow to the First Amendment, in *DuckTales*, crosses on tombstones were strangely adorned by "RIP" in their place. Yet crosses appear in over a dozen other NES games including *Castlevania*, *Ghosts 'N Goblins*, and even *Mappy-Land*. My guess is that NOA thought having their game plastered with overt messages of one religion – that of rampant capitalism/greed – was quite enough. You're just part of the evil 1%, Scrooge! Occupy that money bin!



It's clear now why NOA didn't want Devil World released... SOFT SERVE ICE CREAM.

Nazis

It seems like NOA did not want Americans to enjoy what they fought so hard to earn by defeating the Nazis in World War II... that is defeating Nazis in video games. In both *Top Secret Episode* and *Bionic Commando*, just about all references to the Nazi villains were altered save for a single swastika that snuck by in *Top Secret Episode*... oh and PESKY HITLER FINAL BOSSES IN BOTH GAMES. Come on NOA, we've seen enough History Channel (pre-*Pawn Stars* and *Ax-Men* era) to know what Hitler looks like! Change him to look like a talking giraffe, a wallaby, something!



Yay, you've defeated Hitler!

Nudity

Nudity runs rampant in the NES library. From *Kid Icarus*' blue-boobed Syrens to Alex's sauna-ass in *River City Ransom* to *Taboo: The 6th Sense*'s tarot card debauchery, it seemed that almost half the NES library had either straight-on nudity or huge-breasted women (*Super Off Road*, I'm looking at you-r breasts). If you then tack on all the NES games featuring nude female statues in the background, the percentage probably jumps to somewhere in the 75% range (note: not a scientific calculation). When it came to boobs, Nintendo of America responded like a room of college freshman boys discovering internet porn for the first time in 1997. I wouldn't be surprised if some day a Game Genie code is discovered so you can play as a topless Princess Toadstool in *Super Mario Bros. 2*. In fact, the only time off the top of my head that I can think of nudity being censored out of an NES game is *Top Secret Episode* when Cherry Grace doesn't undress when meeting Golgo 13 in the hotel (don't worry, Golgo still gets the job done). Then again, that game also had the protagonist blowing people's heads off, having sex yet again, and smoking cigarettes to regain his health. There's only so much of Golgo 13's manliness you can contain, I suppose. NOA probably felt it best to let it all slide.

When it came to NES nudity, Nintendo practiced equal opportunity.

So there you have it, the great NES Seal of Approval. As you can see, it was far from consistent and leakier than Hitler's head after being hit by a rocket.

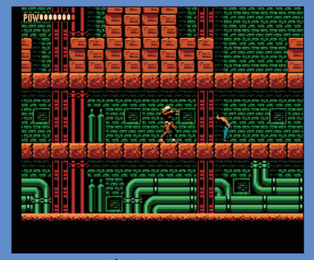
Pat Contri is responsible for goofiness and the book you're reading now.

Unreleased NES Games

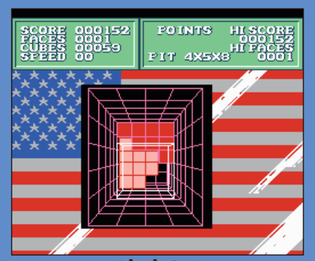
There were many NES games (some Famicom game translations, some original) that were mentioned or advertised in magazines like *Nintendo Power* or others that were never released. Some were even promoted at trade shows such as CES (Consumer Electronics Show). Some titles were 100% finished but shelved, some made it to the prototyping phase but were left unfinished, and some never made it past the conceptual phase. Fortunately, many of the unreleased games have been preserved in modern times to play and enjoy due to the dumping and release of the prototype ROM image. Some unreleased game prototypes, however, have yet to be found. Here are some screenshots of semi-completed and completed NES games that never made it into the hands of consumers and NES game players!

The Adventures of Dr. Franken
(Elite Systems)

Airball
(Tengen)

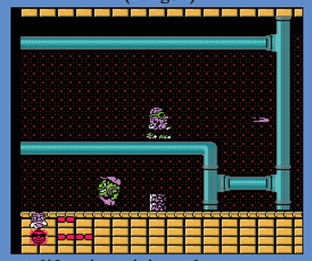


Bio Force Ape
(SETA)

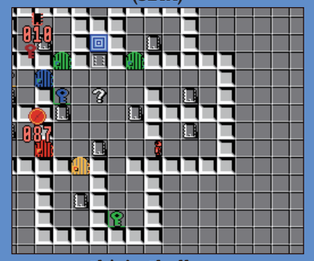


Block Out
(American Technōs)

Buzz & Waldog
(Innovation Technology)



The California Raisins: The Grape Escape
(Capcom)



Chip's Challenge
(Bullet-Proof Software)

Chuck Yeager's Fighter Combat
(Electronic Arts)

Crash 'n the Boys: Ice Challenge
(American Technōs)

Drac's Night Out
(Parker Brothers)

Dragon Wars
(Kemco)

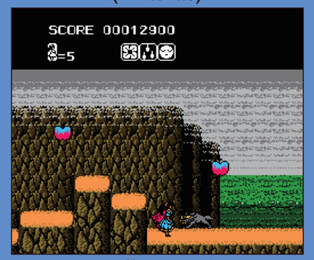
Dreamworld Pogie
(Codemasters)

Earthbound
(Nintendo)

The Escape from Atlantis
(Color Dreams)

Exploding Fist
(Tradewest)

Final Fantasy II
(Square)

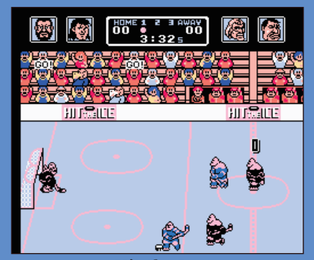


Happily Ever After
(SOFEL)

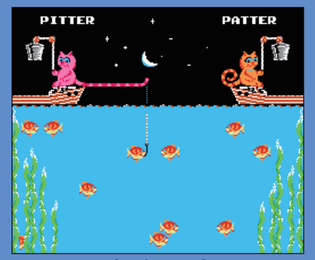
Happy Camper
(Color Dreams)

Hard Drivin'
(Tengen)

Hero Quest
(Gremlin Graphics)

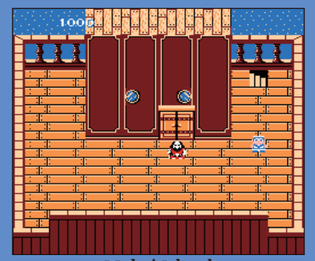


Hit the Ice
(Taito)

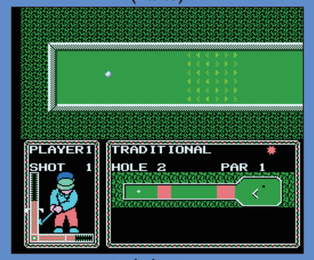


Kitty's Catch
(David Wiebenson)

Kung Fu 2
(Irem)



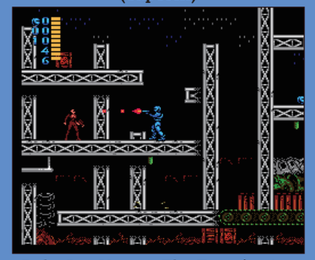
Makai Island
(Capcom)



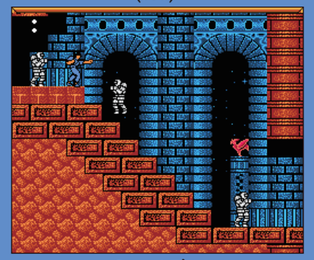
Mini Putt
(JVC)

Pescatore
(Sunsoft)

Robert Byrne's Pool Challenge
(American Video Entertainment)

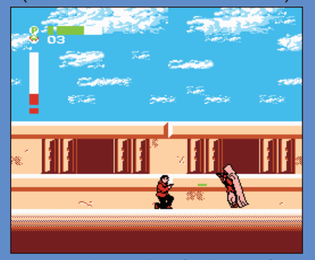


RoboCop Versus The Terminator
(Virgin Games)



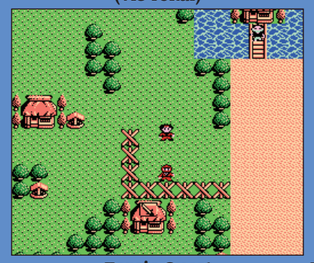
Secret Ties
(Vic Tokai)

SimCity
(Maxis & Nintendo)

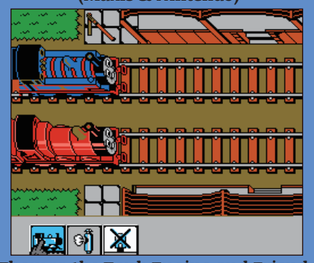


Star Trek V - The Final Frontier
(Bandai)

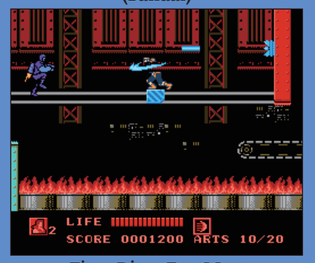
Sunman
(Sunsoft)



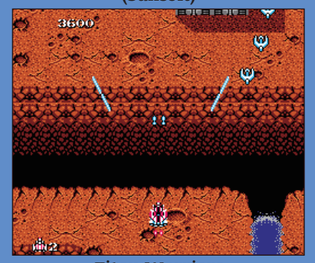
Taro's Quest
(Jaleco)



Thomas the Tank Engine and Friends
(THQ)

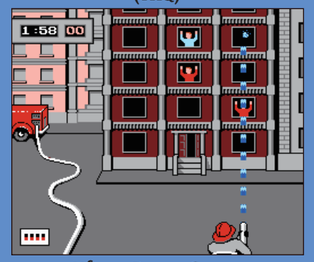


Time Diver Eon Man
(Taito)

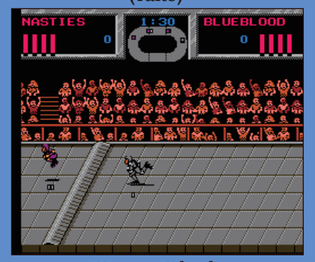


Titan Warriors
(Capcom)

The Tower of Radia
(Tecmo)



Uforce Power Games
(Brøderbund Software)



War on Wheels
(Jaleco)

Xybots
(Tengen)

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Benjamin Trolte
Bennett MacArthur
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Beth Rugg
Beth Tabor
Beverly Wall
bigal0001
BigEffinMoose
BIGsheep
Bill Brannam
Bill Chatzopoulos
Bill Schmedlin
Bill Sheakoski
Billy Andersson
Billy K. Hanna
Billy McDonald
Billy Tran
Binh Du
Binkley
Bisher Howidi
Bizarripher
BJ Chronis
Blaine Alleman
Blake Carter
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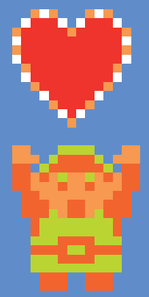

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